

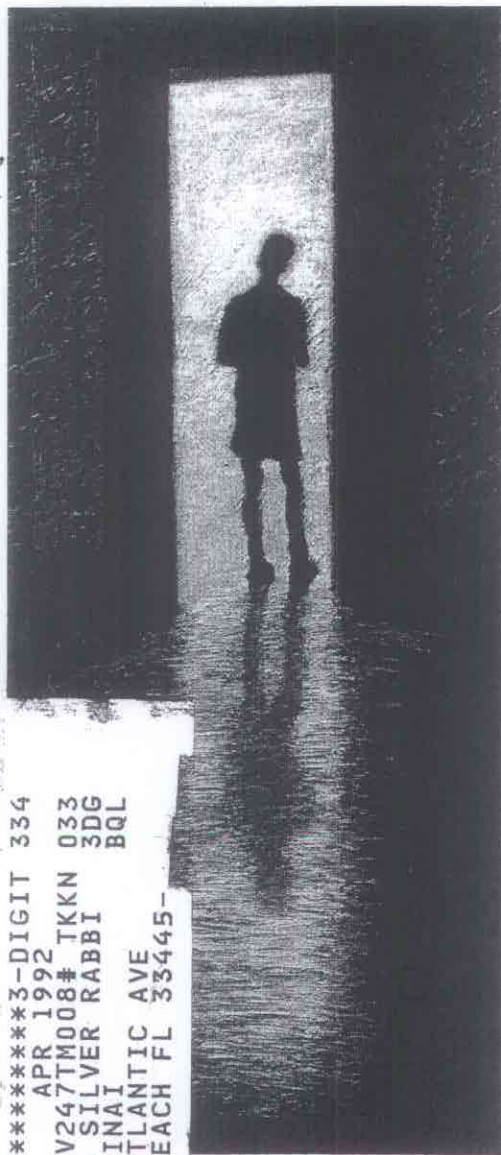
Passover Haggadah Insert

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# TIKKUN

**Reviews:** *Stuart Klawans, Rachel Biale, Melvyn Dubofsky, Deborah Kaufman, Robert Cohen*  
**Beyond Beef:** *Jeremy Rifkin*

A BIMONTHLY JEWISH CRITIQUE OF POLITICS, CULTURE & SOCIETY MARCH/APRIL 1992 \$6.00



# JFK

**The Assassination, the Movie, and the Coverup**

**Peter Dale Scott, Peter Gabel,  
Todd Gitlin, and Michael Lerner**

*Maus and  
Jewish Comics*  
**Paul Buhle**

*Palestinians  
Seeking Peace*  
**Danny Rubinstein**

*Visiting Silwan*  
**Gila Svirsky**

*Jewish Renewal*  
**Arthur Waskow**

*Mismanaging  
the Recession*  
**Fred Block**

*Religion vs. the  
Public Schools*  
**Betty Mensch &  
Alan Freeman**

## Strategies for 1992

*Geraldine Ferraro, Rep. Barbara Boxer, Fred Siegel, Elaine Kamarck, Harold Meyerson, Peter Gabel, and David Kusnet*

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# JFK:

The Assassination and the  
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documented report citing the use of political power by Chasidim to gain special privileges in access to government housing.

The Chasidim relate to no one outside of their own particular sect. They do not relate to the Jewish community of Brooklyn. One example was their crossing the Local 1199 of the Hospital and Health Care Employees Union picket line at Kingsbrook Hospital despite the pleas, in Yiddish, of Jewish women strikers.

This account of Chasidic behavior in no way excuses the destructive behavior of Al Sharpton, a scoundrel if there ever was one.

Marshall F. Dubin  
Brooklyn, New York

*Jim Sleeper responds:*

I've followed Herbert Daughtry since 1980 with decreasing respect and increasing exasperation. In *The Closest of Strangers*, I explain why I think his Christian/Marxist/Black-nationalist politics is hopelessly confused and counterproductive. As predominantly black organizations such as East Brooklyn Congregations have built thousands of affordable homes

and strengthened their communities, Daughtry, who preaches in Brooklyn but lives in suburban Teaneck, New Jersey, has drifted increasingly into nationalistic rhetoric and ambulance chasing. He is so deeply imprisoned in his peculiar racial consciousness that, politically, he simply doesn't know what he is doing. In consequence, some of it is destructive.

Daughtry stood right next to the Reverend Al Sharpton and attorney Colin Moore at several press conferences as they fabricated lies about the Crown Heights auto accident. Nodding in approval, he added, "We've got a group here, the Chasidic community, abusing their power in collusion with city officials, backed up by the police." (As I explained in my essay, such claims are seriously outdated.) According to *New York Newsday*, Daughtry went on to note that the federal government had intervened in the South when local governments had been "in cahoots with the KKK," so the feds should intervene here in Brooklyn, too.

During the riots, Daughtry was observed running among rock-throwing youths, cheering them on. Asked about this by *Newsday* reporter Merle English, he replied: "My heart is in the street. That crowd is my crowd." Saying that he was there to ensure that those arrested were treated properly, Daughtry added that his message was "I'm here with you. I may not agree with what you're doing but I'm not going to stand in the way and tell [you] about cooling it." He said he resented City Hall's suggestion that it is the clergy's duty to "still the natives."

This is muddled leadership, a disservice to black youth and racial justice, and I find Daughtry's statements demagogic. I also find it troubling that, at a Sunday service at his House of the Lord Church a couple months after the Crown Heights melee, he chose, in introducing visiting celebrities, to save the best for last: "Leonard Jeffries!" he cried, as his congregation burst into a prolonged ovation. Jeffries would have been greeted with silence by twice as many worshippers at the Reverend Johnny Ray Youngblood's St. Paul's Community Baptist Church. It is because Daughtry is so terminally besotted with racial grievance that he became a cheerleader for the demented Jeffries.

Marshall Dubin's letter perpetuates stereotypes of city favoritism to

# JFK JFK JFK

"I haven't seen JFK, but I suspect the whole fuss comes from simple-minded people looking for conspiracies because they can't handle the complexities of politics." This response is as likely to arise on the Left these days as on the Right. Such thinking comes in part out of the fear among former social-change activists that reminding themselves of how democratic politics in this country has been subverted—from the Kennedy assassination to Watergate to the Iran-Contra scandal—will force them to rethink the various life-choices that led them away from political involvement. One need not endorse the particular details of Oliver Stone's explanation of the Kennedy assassination to realize that some version of a conspiracy theory may be more consistent with the facts available today than any version of the "lone assassin" theory.

Peter Dale Scott, in the provocative interview in this special section, provides us with a state-of-the-art account of the forces that were likely at work in providing the background from which the assassination and its cover-up emanated. But we are equally interested in the political meaning of the desperate attempts to discredit Stone's movie, which reflect not only the continuing cover-up, but also the need to contain and repress the excitement and vitality that swept this country in the sixties and have never been fully extinguished.

## JFK and the Possibility of Possibility

Michael Lerner

**T**he central political issue in America is this: Will people feel empowered and mobilized to engage in political activity to change society, or will they leave politics in the hands of established elites who shape public opinion and determine political outcomes? *JFK* the movie, like JFK the president, has generated fierce attacks precisely because each, in very different contexts, threatened to mobilize and empower.

Through three decades of depression, war against fascism, cold war, and McCarthyism, the elites that governed America had managed to fend off all serious critiques of their system of power, to significantly weaken and demobilize the labor movement, and to erect a seemingly seamless celebration of American civilization in the 1950s. All the more striking, then, that some sectors of the country's ruling elites began to suspect in the early 1960s that the president of the United States might himself be interested in challenging the existing social

order—and to fear that his presidency was already generating social turmoil that might return the country to the more turbulent politics of the 1930s.

Leftist critics of *JFK* entirely miss the point when they insist that the actual John F. Kennedy was never interested in challenging the existing inequalities of wealth and power, despite his interest in socialist author Michael Harrington's bestselling book *The Other America*. True enough, Kennedy was a loyalist to the system who used the issue of a missile gap to win election. But the "capital strike" against him that produced a recession in his administration's early years may have sobered him and made him resent what entrenched interests could do to weaken his presidency. And in the days after the Bay of Pigs fiasco he eventually came to understand and resent that he was being manipulated and lied to by Pentagon officials. Kennedy's attempts to strike an arms-reduction agreement with Khrushchev made many in the arms community fear that he was in fact moving toward ending the cold war; by the fall of 1963 his speeches seemed designed to create a climate of public opinion receptive to such a development. When he refused to recognize Latin American dictators who had recently come to power through military coups, and announced plans to withdraw troops from Vietnam, the

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*Michael Lerner's indictment as part of the "Seattle Seven" for his role as a national leader of the antiwar movement, and the sworn testimony by J. Edgar Hoover claiming that he was "one of the most dangerous criminals in America," were later shown to be part of the systematic, covert campaign by the FBI to disrupt and destroy the antiwar movement (cf. COINTELPRO Hearings of the U.S. Congress, 1976).*

nation's ruling elites may have been that much more inclined to believe that somehow a radical reformer had slipped into the most powerful position in America.

That elites of wealth and power may have wildly overreacted, that they may have seen in Kennedy's youth, his Catholic religion, and his alliances with civil-rights forces signs of a radicalism that he never possessed, may tell us something about their own failure to understand how powerful their own system really was. Anyone who later heard Attorney General John Mitchell describe the 1970 peace demonstration as something reminiscent of the storming of the Winter Palace in the 1917 Russian Revolution may recognize that those in the centers of power sometimes see their system as more vulnerable and less entrenched than those of us who have been struggling to change it. Many have argued persuasively that had Kennedy lived, he would have proved a force for social stability and moderation, and that his loyalties to American imperial interests would eventually have become less equivocal.

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*Defeating the spirit of optimism  
was the most important victory  
America's ruling elites could  
engineer—in many ways far  
more important than winning  
the war in Vietnam itself.*

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But this still misses the political meaning of the Kennedy presidency. Whatever Kennedy's ultimate intentions, he built his campaign and his presidency by forging a new optimism and idealism that encouraged Americans to believe that their lives ought to be dedicated to creating a just and humane society. Kennedy's speeches and his aliveness (and, yes, even his only partially contained sexuality) had communicated a new sense of possibilities to the population—most notably the possibility that life would not be only about survival but also about some higher meaning and purpose. Kennedy unleashed expectations he could not, and perhaps never intended to, fulfill. The hundreds of thousands of us who gathered for the March on Washington two months before Kennedy was assassinated and who listened to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I have a dream" speech would never have assembled had we not believed that Kennedy needed to be pushed—or given support—to stand up for principles that he himself had articulated. Kennedy created the perception that his administration was seeking to mobilize Americans to build

a new society based on mutual caring and dedication to principle—and this perception, far more than the details of what Kennedy actually pushed for in Congress or in the executive branch, far more than what he actually favored doing in Vietnam, defined what Kennedy was to most Americans. If those who conspired to kill the president were in fact the people that Peter Dale Scott claims them to be in his interview on page 40 of this issue of *Tikkun*, they were *not* mistaken to view Kennedy as a threat—not because of what he believed but because of the hopefulness and optimism that he had unleashed.

**I**t was precisely this optimism, this spirit of possibility, that was the central threat to the elites of wealth and power in the 1960s, and squashing that spirit has been the central issue of American politics ever since. And this is perhaps the most powerful, though rarely drawn, "lesson of the sixties"—that America's ruling elites are prepared to adopt any political program or demand, short of sacrificing their disproportionate share of the wealth and power—as long as they do not, in the process, empower people to believe that they can and should be involved in the process of shaping reality. The country's ruling elites concluded after the Tet Offensive in 1968 that the U.S. needed to get out of Vietnam, even if it meant ceding the area to the Communists. But they could not leave as long as they feared that withdrawal from Vietnam might encourage the antiwar movement to make ever more sweeping demands to limit America's imperial ambitions. Similarly, once the civil-rights movement had effectively dissolved, parts of its program could more easily be adopted as national policy. Every struggle for reform in America in the past decades has actually been two struggles: one about the substance of the demand, the other about how much giving in to a particular demand would encourage people to continue to struggle for something more.

The decisive victory for ruling elites was in the dissolution of the sixties movements, which represented the most serious challenge to the establishment's hegemony since the 1930s. The spirit of possibility and hopefulness that grew out of the mass perception of the Kennedy years led to an infectious optimism that swept millions into its embrace. Defeating that spirit of optimism was the most important victory America's ruling elites could engineer—in many ways far more important than winning the war in Vietnam itself.

The defeat of these movements, though partly a product of a systematic campaign of FBI-sponsored dirty tricks and repression, was ensured partly by the way movement activists turned on each other in a PC frenzy of self- and other-blaming. Having created

utopian criteria for who was a "good enough" social-change activist, we discovered that none of us was free enough of racism, sexism, egotism, or self-interest to withstand the ferocious self-criticism that became the central dynamic of movement life in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The spirit of openness, trust, self-confidence, and optimism that had made the movement feel so inviting in the early sixties gradually evaporated. Even the most dedicated activists withdrew, tired of being denounced for providing leadership or for having ideas or for being white or for being heterosexual or for wanting to have a family or for being male or for worrying about a way to make a living. Most still retained their analysis of what was wrong in society, but they no longer believed that *they* could be the ones to change things. They continued to oppose the evils they had seen, but opposition was now a matter of internal consciousness rather than public social activism.

**E**ver since Watergate, ruling elites have recognized the changed circumstances and no longer feel the need to deny the existence of fundamental problems in our society. Rather, it was sufficient to reinforce the perception that the only possible change would occur through the self-corrective mechanisms of ruling elites, that social movements would always lead to frustration and self-defeat, and that the only wise thing for people to do was to take care of number one and let the larger social reality continue to limp along as it always had. One retained one's "consciousness" but abandoned any form of activism.

In short, we enter the era of the *New Republic*—the quintessential expression of elitist cynicism parading as wisdom and maturity. We are encouraged to see through everything, but to believe in nothing, to imagine that there is nothing worth taking risks for, that anyone who pursues a political vision with passion must necessarily be a fanatic, and that the best thing to do is to view the whole world with a detached and ironic bemusement, armed with clever dismissive turns of phrase and sophisticated excuses for noninvolvement. In the world that the *New Republic* consciousness helped to shape, spiritual and moral values and commitments are steps toward Khomeini-ism, but irony and brilliant cynicism are the new forms of secular salvation.

Given this outlook, I predict that the ferocious attempts to discredit Oliver Stone's movie will soon be abandoned, and instead Stone will receive prizes and Academy Awards and we will be told that he has done us all a great service, that the truths in the film have been acknowledged and incorporated into our public understanding, and that, yes, maybe there really once was a conspiracy, in long-ago times when cold wars

roamed the earth. Congressional files will be opened—though as Peter Dale Scott points out, these are not the important files, and even should these other files be opened we are likely to "discover" that the key information has "mysteriously disappeared" or "been lost."

Or perhaps the ruling elites will find themselves saved by the popularization of postmodern consciousness that deconstructs the category of conspiracies and doubts that there is any coherent history that could allow for explanation. How chic to doubt that history could be anything but a series of accidents and coincidences, that there is no "they" with manipulative (or certainly not conspiratorial) intentions, because there is no "we" to be manipulated. How fashionable to doubt the possibility of meanings in history—and how ultimately demobilizing and consonant with existing systems of power. The spirit of irony, of "no answers," of the proliferation of difference without any criterion for truth or goodness may in the long run be the most effective way ruling elites can ever find to get themselves off the hot seat of critical scrutiny. Tellingly, all these approaches to culture have been popularized by refugees from the social-change movements of the sixties who have given up on the possibility of transformative political action; thus such approaches are uniquely suited to serve as the most important weapon of demobilization and disempowerment yet conceived.

So why the brouhaha about Stone's film? Because for one moment it put people back into the consciousness of the sixties, back before deconstruction and irony and cynicism and pessimism had triumphed, and back into remembering how good it felt to see the world from the standpoint of hope, possibility, and an empowering commitment to principle. Granted, Stone never understands the power of social movements, never depicts them in anything but a caricatured way, and instead embodies the spirit of the age in the crusading person of Jim Garrison. Yet nevertheless Garrison embodies in the film that sense of empowered outrage that made him feel entitled to seek the truth and courageous enough to take risks to change a reality he found appalling. It was that spirit of empowerment that gripped millions of people in the sixties, and what is most important about the film is the degree to which it reminds us of how good and whole it was to have those feelings.

Yet we are all well defended against those feelings. We have all made our accommodations with an America bereft of social movements and communitarian hopes. We all have built lives based on the probability that nothing like the sixties will ever happen again, and hence that nothing much better than what is happening now will ever happen. To the extent that we feel that way, we hasten to remind ourselves that "it was only a movie,"

become fascinated with the details of where Stone went wrong—or even with the details of where he is right, because being a conspiracy buff can be just another way to escape facing the feelings of possibility that the film momentarily evokes. Those feelings—the feelings that we can be historical agents again, that the world really is not

fixed, that there are really millions of other people around us who know that something is fundamentally wrong and want things to be different—are both exciting and deeply frightening. No wonder, then, that so many people are fascinated by *JFK* and yet desperate to remind themselves that it's not really real. □

## The Assassination and the Cover-up: What Really Happened?

*An Interview with Peter Dale Scott*

**Tikkun:** What's your understanding of why there is so much controversy around the film *JFK*?

**Peter Dale Scott:** As an artist in touch with his own inner craziness, Stone has reached and stimulated the craziness of the country. He has touched an area of denial where this country has been involved in a collective suppression of some very sensitive truths. One is that the president was killed by a conspiracy. Another is that his death has had enormous political consequences—even though we all pretend that it made no difference and that we can all lead our lives as if our political process were working normally. More specifically, the assassination changed the direction of U.S. policy in Vietnam.

**Tikkun:** What makes you think that Vietnam policy changed?

**Scott:** We didn't know it at the time, but the Pentagon Papers, leaked to the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* in 1971, revealed two critical National Security Action Memoranda (NSAMs). In the first, Kennedy's NSAM 263 of October 11, 1963, the president ordered the "implementation of a plan" for withdrawing a

thousand U.S. troops from Vietnam by the end of December 1963, as the first stage of a plan to withdraw the bulk of U.S. troops by the end of 1965. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's military recommendations, which were approved in this NSAM, included a program to train Vietnamese "so that essential functions now performed by U.S. military personnel can be carried out by [the] Vietnamese by the end of 1965, [and] it should be possible to withdraw the bulk of U.S. personnel by that time." And here we are not talking of the language of hopes and objectives, but of the implementation of a plan. But the American people never knew about NSAM 263 until the Pentagon Papers, so they didn't know of this secret implementation, which was annulled by NSAM 273.

On November 24, two days after the assassination, NSAM 273 was approved, though it was later dated November 26. NSAM 273 quietly overrode the Kennedy plan. Instead of reaffirming the order implementing troop withdrawal, it subtly reverted to an earlier, publicly stated "objective" of getting the troops out. Of course, no one wanted the troops there forever, so the objective of getting them out was shared by all sides, including Johnson and Nixon through all the years they escalated the struggle in various ways. What was overridden in NSAM 273 was the actual implementation of a real plan to get the troops out. Instead, NSAM 273 authorized plans for a direct United States role against North Vietnam, and this violated the Kennedy guidelines, which had always been that the U.S. was there in an advisory role. Johnson, on the other hand, wanted a U.S. commitment to *win* the war by whatever means it took—a commitment that Kennedy turned down in 1961 and again in October 1963. The Pentagon

---

*Peter Dale Scott is professor of English at the University of California at Berkeley. His book *The Politics of Escalation* (Beacon Press, 1966) was one of the first to document the systematic deceit of the American people by the Johnson administration as it escalated the war in Vietnam. He has published numerous articles and books including *Cocaine Politics* (University of California Press, 1991), on the relationship between the CIA and drug traffickers. Oliver Stone cited his research on the Kennedy assassination in the New York Times op-ed piece he wrote defending himself from his critics.*

bureaucracy understood the meaning of this change—that after NSAM 273 the U.S. was in to win the war and not just to help the South Vietnamese government.

Of course, this shift in policy direction did not become clear to those outside the Pentagon until later. Kennedy had planned to delay implementing the bulk of the withdrawal until after the 1964 election, and Johnson delayed the bulk of the escalation until after he was reelected. Both of them felt that the Vietnam issue could work against them in a presidential election, so neither wanted to show fully what he was planning to do.

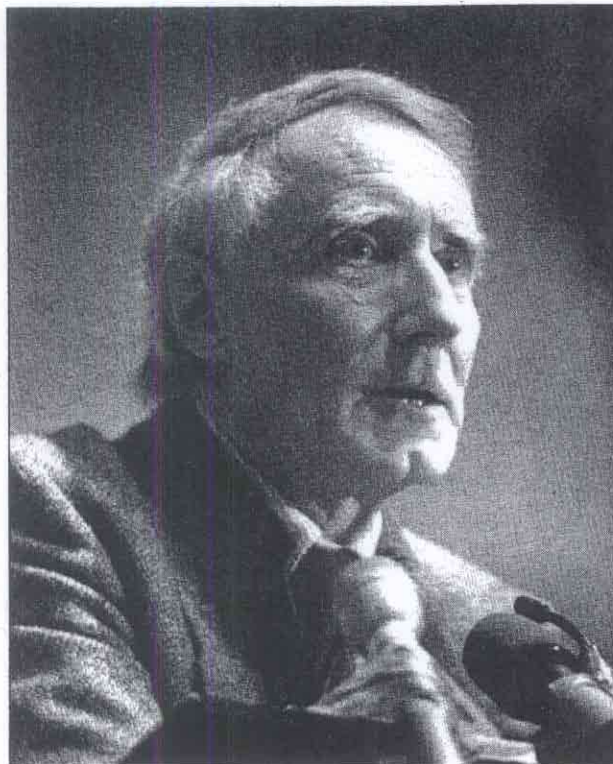
**Tikkun:** But certainly people inside the government must have recognized this dramatic shift in direction?

**Scott:** Yes. There was a whole generation of people who suppressed this knowledge, for others as well as themselves. For example, many of the Kennedy advisors who stayed on in the Johnson administration had all kinds of personal reasons for not wanting to acknowledge the difference in direction between the Kennedy and Johnson administrations.

**Tikkun:** Because doing so would undermine their careers?

**Scott:** Because it would undermine their self-respect as well as their status. Many of these people were being attacked by those who had left the Johnson administration, and they felt a need to defend their decision to stay there. Many believed that Johnson's Great Society was a fulfillment of Kennedy's liberalism, so they had reason to want to minimize—even to themselves—the foreign-policy consequence of the shift from Kennedy to Johnson.

And then NSAM 273, by reasserting the earlier Kennedy objective of bringing troops home, was able to confuse people about the real change that had occurred. The newspapers bought into the notion that there had been no shift, and they've been saying the same thing ever since. On November 21, one day before the assassination, the *New York Times* reported on the announcement made at a high-level Honolulu Conference the day before that there would be a withdrawal of troops. On November 25, three days after the assassination, the *Times* said that the objective of withdrawal remained the same as publicly announced on October 3. Only an insider who actually knew the content of the relevant NSAMs would know that we had retreated from the October 11 implementation of plans for withdrawal back to the earlier statement of "objectives." The histories of the Vietnam War have been silent on this point; even major books such as *Kennedy in Vietnam* by



*Peter Dale Scott addressing a Tikkun forum on JFK.*

William Rust have systematically ignored the fact that shortly before his assassination, the president had implemented a plan for withdrawal.

**Tikkun:** If Kennedy wanted to get out of Vietnam, and he knew he would have to fight against those in the Department of Defense who did not want to get out, how could he have come up with a plan unless he had other people backing him?

**Scott:** He did have a few supporters in the administration. He was working chiefly with the State Department and its director of intelligence and research, Roger Hilsman. In 1964 John McNaughton, working under McNamara in the Pentagon, told witnesses that McNamara said Kennedy intended to pull out by 1965. This can't be reduced to some public-relations statement aimed at placating the doves in Congress like Senator Wayne Morse. Kennedy had given McNamara instructions to plan and then implement the whole withdrawal.

The problem for Kennedy was that there were deep divisions within his administration and he did not always know who was loyal to his own perspective. Kennedy thought that McNamara and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Maxwell Taylor were loyalists, but Taylor, it turned out, really wanted to bomb North Vietnam. Kennedy had a very recalcitrant Joint Chiefs



over which he tried to impose civilian bureaucratic control, through both McNamara and the office of International Security Affairs, which McNaughton headed. There was a great deal of plotting by the military not only against Kennedy but against the whole attempt to enforce civilian control. So the Pentagon was not a reliable source of information for Kennedy. For example, the military kept telling Kennedy that the war was going well, but it had a second set of intelligence reports that were telling the truth about Vietnam—that the war was going terribly. They kept this from both Kennedy and McNamara. The only senior person who was told what was really going on was Vice President Johnson—so Johnson was party to information being withheld conspiratorially from the president.

**Tikkun:** Was Johnson aware that Kennedy did not know how badly the war was going?

**Scott:** I don't know. After a while Kennedy knew much of the truth from Hilsman and others. But Kennedy and Johnson certainly knew that they represented opposite positions on Vietnam.

**Tikkun:** What could the motive have been for somebody like McNamara or Hilsman or anyone else who shared Kennedy's objective to end the war not to say that there had been a dramatic change? Either they really didn't want the war to end, or they didn't read the NSAMs the way you are proposing they should be read. If they wanted to end the war, why did they go from serving a president who supported withdrawal to a president who supported massive escalation?

**Scott:** First of all, I don't think Johnson envisioned either a massive escalation or ground troops at this stage, but rather a gradual escalation toward U.S. bombing.

Some people argue that Johnson adjusted to the deteriorating military situation only after Kennedy died, and that Kennedy would have adjusted to it too if he had lived. I do not claim to know what Kennedy would have done; I am only talking about what he had done by October 1963.

The change that took place in December was not really a change on the battlefield, or even a change in the perception of the war, so much as a change in the rhetoric used to describe it. The military had known since 1961 that the war was going badly, but the rules of the game were that as long as Kennedy was president they had to pretend that it was going well in order to keep the president and Congress on board. When Johnson became president, the rules of the rhetorical game changed. It was now quite appropriate to say that the

war was going badly because at that stage, the Pentagon was trying to justify escalating the conflict.

Even Kennedy, by October 1963, knew things were not going so well, but he was in effect telling the military, "OK, you say it is going well, so in that case we're going to start withdrawing the troops." But that didn't mean that he actually thought the war was going well.

**Tikkun:** So then how did Kennedy know he was being lied to?

**Scott:** He was getting this information from the Intelligence and Research division of the State Department, where Roger Hilsman worked. That is why it is important to note that in January of this year Roger Hilsman stated publicly in a letter to the *New York Times* that Kennedy was in fact planning to withdraw from Vietnam.

**Tikkun:** The effect of the assassination, then, was to change the Vietnam policy.

**Scott:** And also policy in Latin America. There had been three military coups in Latin America in 1963—in Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, and Honduras—but Kennedy had refused to recognize the new governments. Thomas Mann, the ambassador to Mexico who had been deeply involved in the Guatemalan coup, was so upset with Kennedy's Latin American policy that he announced he was going to retire by the end of 1963. Once Kennedy was murdered, Mann became the new assistant secretary of state for Latin America; the U.S. recognized these three military coups and went on to help engineer a much more significant and larger military coup in Brazil in March 1964. (U.S. warships stationed just offshore were prepared to intervene if things went badly, and acted as an encouragement to the Brazilian military to overthrow the government.) But of course, the fact that U.S. policy toward Latin America changed as a consequence of the assassination doesn't mean that it was necessarily the motive, and certainly not the only motive.

**Tikkun:** If someone like Hilsman knew that U.S. policy toward Vietnam changed as a result of the assassination, and he opposed the war enough not to want to be part of the new administration, then why didn't he say what he knew at the time? Why did he wait so long? If he opposed the war, why didn't he use this fact as part of his opposition to the war by saying publicly that Kennedy was planning to end it?

**Scott:** Perhaps because he was not willing to take major personal risks to oppose the war. I suppose he thought

he could be useful to a future administration—and so he observed the rules of the game instead of washing dirty linen in public.

McNamara, on the other hand, stayed in the Johnson administration. Perhaps he hoped for the implementation of the Great Society. Meanwhile, no one inside the administration thought that Vietnam would become the monster it became. There was a certain “can-do” mentality that pervaded the Pentagon—and to be a good team player you had to share the belief that the United States could do anything. Certainly it could win against peasants, and there were a lot of people with their new notions of special antiguerrilla warfare who had a vested interest in proving that the U.S. could do anything and win anywhere. The Kennedy brothers themselves had some of that can-do enthusiasm in 1961. By 1963, even Bobby Kennedy, who had been invested in the idea of counterinsurgency, was raising the question inside the administration, Can we win? And if not, isn't now the time to get out?

**Tikkun:** Why didn't Bobby Kennedy say something when U.S. policy changed?

**Scott:** It was a very big move when Bobby Kennedy began to oppose the war publicly, even in 1967. Once you've started a war, there is strong bureaucratic pressure to stick with it. To the Left in the 1960s, it seemed obvious that if you were in a bad war, you would oppose it. But that is not obvious to bureaucrats. Daniel Ellsberg is virtually the only insider who publicly opposed the war. There were many players who said one thing privately, or who opposed U.S. ground troops, but none of them ever said that in public. What Bobby Kennedy did was much more than what others around him were doing.

**Tikkun:** Still, once Bobby Kennedy had gone out on a limb to oppose the war, why didn't he use the fact that his brother had been opposed to it too? It seems very strange that if there was a serious change in policy following Kennedy's death, no one said this publicly. Were opponents of the war afraid that they themselves would be hurt?

**Scott:** No. I think the first reason was their desire to protect the damaged fabric of national confidence. A lot of people joined in a massive cover-up of the policy change because of the enormity of the assassination and the consequent feeling that it was important to have Americans believe in our national institutions, particularly the presidency. They wanted to create the illusion of continuity so that the politics of the country would not be

disrupted, and to do that they had to insist on the continuity of policy in Vietnam. This was, I believe, an irrational thing to have done, because it promoted more distrust in the long run and more doubts about the legitimacy of the institutions whose credibility it was designed to enhance. But I understand why people made that choice in the short run.

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*Organized crime is tolerated because it works in collaboration with the government. If you actually live in New York or Chicago and read the newspapers, you know this. But if you are a political scientist, for some reason you don't.*

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Second, Bobby Kennedy had something on Johnson, so why not use it? But it is extremely likely that Johnson also had stuff on Bobby Kennedy. For example, there were a lot of very seamy aspects to Marilyn Monroe's death that involved *both* John F. Kennedy's affair with her and the possibility that Bobby Kennedy was probably with her the night she died. The FBI was following this. A story of Monroe committing suicide in anguish over having been rebuffed by the president of the United States might well have created a major scandal; that might account for why Bobby Kennedy went to try to calm her down that night. Anthony Summers's book *Goddess* shows that there were phone calls to the White House around the time of her death and that someone came in and seized records of these calls and interrupted the local investigation. This is just a trivial example of the sort of thing that Johnson and the FBI had on Bobby Kennedy. *false*

Incidentally, some people have claimed that Bobby Kennedy said privately in 1968 that if he were elected president he would reopen the assassination investigation. But to question the lone assassin theory was much more dangerous in 1963—and dangerous in a way that would have made many liberals very wary of pursuing it further. *false*

The brilliance of the assassination plot was that the conspirators had forged trails to induce a cover-up. There were, for example, trails that potentially linked Oswald to Fidel Castro or to the KGB and Khrushchev—a trail that might lead to war. Moreover, there was false evidence given to the Secret Service that led to a

*no reason to believe this*  
group of anti-Castro Cubans in Chicago whose operations had been authorized indirectly by Bobby Kennedy himself.

After the Cuban Missile Crisis, the United States promised Khrushchev not only that it would not invade Cuba, but also that it would end covert operations that were being mounted by Cubans against Castro directly from the United States. Some of these Cubans were then organized into Operation Second Naval Guerilla, to conduct operations against Castro from outside the U.S. This was called Track One. But there were others still inside the U.S. who were involved in blowing up Soviet ships in order to sabotage the Kennedy-Khrushchev understanding. Bobby Kennedy wanted to honor the commitment to Khrushchev by getting as many as possible of those potentially unruly Cubans who might be involved in such activity to leave the U.S. and conduct their operations under a Track Two. He had indirectly authorized a Cuban named Paulino Sierra Martinez to gather these Cubans and get them out of the U.S., where they could go on doing whatever they wanted against Castro—including killing him (and with U.S. money). Bobby Kennedy was willing to get them money, bribes, whatever it took to get them out of the U.S. After the assassination, a false trail was laid leading the Secret Service investigation to Sierra; this might have opened up a whole area of national security that no one, including Bobby Kennedy, wanted to expose. So at a certain point the FBI ordered the Secret Service to terminate this particular investigation, which in any case had received a lot of false information.

This is just one of several trails that might have led in directions that no one wanted to investigate. This is part of why I don't think the killing was done by the mob alone, as some assassination buffs have tried to argue. It is relatively easy to kill the president. What is very difficult to guarantee is the kind of massive consensual cover-up that happened after Kennedy was killed. The key to that cover-up was the perception many people shared with those in power that the truth might very well violate international order, risk war against Cuba or even war against the Soviet Union, and also risk the exposure of a whole range of national security secrets including this Track One and Track Two arrangement that Bobby Kennedy had authorized. This arrangement took greater access to government files than the Mafia possessed.

**Tikkun:** Your argument seems to amount to the following: There was a motive for killing the president, and there was a cover-up afterward. But this does not establish that there was a conspiracy to kill the president. Do you know who actually killed the president?

**Scott:** On the basis of what I know, I am not in a position to identify who killed the president. What I can say is that my research identifies a whole set of distinct groups and sometimes even competing groups who were all pushing for an escalation of the war in Vietnam and against Cuba, and also a set of groups who were responsible for the conspiratorial cover-up of the assassination—and there is an overlap between the sets of groups. This suggests a line for further research, but it does not amount to evidentiary proof of who killed Kennedy or why.

I can prove that there were many arrangements and conspiracies to cover up who killed Kennedy. Some of these were almost certainly benign, such as the motives of Earl Warren, who, when he accepted the position as chair of the investigating commission, spoke of the need to avoid World War III. But there were also people who conspired before the assassination to link Lee Harvey Oswald to the KGB. These people knew well enough how the CIA and FBI worked to be able to plant things in CIA and FBI files that would make these agencies afraid that their own people would be implicated, should the investigation proceed in certain directions.

I believe there was an alliance of people inside and outside the government involved in the conspiracy, and I'll go even further than Oliver Stone and say that I believe that one of the elements in this conspiracy included Lyndon Johnson's financial backers—particularly those who had a stake in the military-industrial complex. At least one of these people presciently bought a lot of stock in his own aerospace firm prior to the assassination, which to me is a clue that he knew that the assassination was coming. I think there was an intelligence-Mafia connection that included members of the intelligence community who were involved with military-industrial corporate backers of Lyndon Johnson, who in turn were involved with Mafia people. At a minimum, you have to consider this triad of forces.

**Tikkun:** I want to reemphasize, however, that establishing a conspiracy to cover up does *not* establish a conspiracy to assassinate. This is particularly true if, as you say, the agencies had an independent reason to cover up—namely that someone had planted material in their files that seemed to link them to the assassination, even though they knew they were not involved.

**Scott:** Yes, that is true. But we have a stronger prima facie case against those who planted the evidence before the assassination. I cannot believe it is just coincidental that there is so much sensitive stuff about Lee Harvey Oswald and Jack Ruby that was certain to be found. I believe that there was a conspiracy to plant information

implicating Oswald and that it was planted by people who knew that the assassination was going to happen and that Oswald was going to be set up to take responsibility. Now, I recognize that in the case of killing a president, there are many people who will conspire to make the new government look continuous with the old one for entirely innocent reasons, particularly the need to maintain the appearance of law and order.

But the cover-up is also rooted in a repression of our awareness of the deep politics of American society. There is a set of political realities concerned with who is governing that we typically try to keep out of our consciousness, even though these realities are continually asserting themselves. For example, there are major American cities like New York, Chicago, and Dallas where elements of organized crime play an important role in the city administration. This has been true in some cities for many decades. The FBI understands this, and has used organized crime to gain information and even to enforce order. Organized crime is tolerated because it works in collaboration with government. If you actually live in New York or Chicago and read the newspapers, you know this. But if you are a political scientist, for some reason you don't.

Similarly, most people know that money has a large role in determining the outcome of elections. That's

what frequently determines who becomes the leading candidate for the nomination, which candidates are taken seriously by the media, and whose messages get communicated to the electorate. This is part of what I call "deep politics"—arrangements everybody knows about, but few acknowledge. To do so forces us to say that we don't really live in a democracy but a plutocracy.

The deep politics must be acknowledged in order to unravel the facts of the Kennedy assassination—but that requires getting into areas that our society has repressed for a long time. It's hard to believe this now, but this system repressed the fact that the CIA worked together with the Mafia on attempts to kill Castro; and that the Mafia was involved because Castro appears to have reneged on what the Mafia believed was an agreement to split profits from Cuban casinos with them. Instead, Castro in effect ousted the Mafia from the casinos. Lee Harvey Oswald and Jack Ruby were both deeply interested in Cuba—Oswald tried to go there, and Ruby actually went there in 1959 (when he was an FBI informant), under circumstances that suggest that he may have been part of a massive operation to get casino cash out of Cuba and back to the U.S.

The assassination cover-up was effective precisely because it could rely on the fact that various agencies and powerful people would participate in keeping any

label  
and  
not  
false



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knowledge of the deep <sup>and</sup> politics out of public consciousness. Particularly given the coordination between the CIA and the Mafia on attempts to kill Castro, an investigation might have exposed not only these actions but might have also exposed a larger set of dirty tricks that had been going on for a long time.

The more you study the deep politics, the more you see the continuous involvement of some of the same players in other events. I got interested in Watergate because one of the Watergate burglars was Frank Sturgis, whom I had already written about in my manuscript *The Dallas Conspiracy*. I claimed that Sturgis had been publicly ordered by the Kennedy administration to stop his incriminating anti-Castro activities in 1963 and had collaborated in false stories about Oswald. Nixon's top aide, H.R. Haldeman, later said in his book about Watergate, *The Ends of Power*, that when Nixon referred in June 1974 to "the Bay of Pigs thing" on the smoking gun transcript of the Watergate tapes, "he was actually referring to the Kennedy assassination." In response the CIA ordered the FBI to stop investigating Watergate for a while, although everyone at the time was saying that the CIA was squeaky clean and that the Watergate event was strictly something to do with Nixon, his gang, his plumbers, and his attorney general. But Nixon told Haldeman to tell Richard Helms, the head of the CIA, to call off the investigation because it would uncover "the Bay of Pigs thing." What was *not* known in "the Bay of Pigs thing" was the CIA-Mafia plotting to murder Castro, and the link to the Kennedy assassination, including Frank Sturgis, one self-proclaimed plotter against Castro, who was involved in the Kennedy cover-up. It seems that Nixon was trying to signal that the government could not investigate Watergate too far because they'd get back into the Kennedy assassination. If all these things were investigated, people would end up not believing in their institutions at all, and that would create a crisis that could be exploited, either by the Left or just as possibly by the Right.

**Tikkun:** Your argument so far still stands strongest on the assertion of a cover-up, but not as strong on who actually killed Kennedy. Can you speculate here on that?

**Scott:** In my research, the most suggestive clues have emerged from a relatively restricted circle within what I call the dark quadrant of suppressed relationships or deep politics: a circle within the tripartite world of first, CIA, defense, and other intelligence networks; second, the underworld of organized crime and anti-Castro Cubans; and third, corporate interests with links both to the intelligence and defense communities and also to organized crime. The key is that all those in this

dark quadrant would have resisted its exposure whether or not they were key plotters.

This dark quadrant was precisely the area the Warren Commission was so ill-equipped to look at. It failed to look properly at CIA and FBI misfunctions, not only because ex-CIA director Allen Dulles was its most active member, but because it had to rely on the CIA and FBI as its investigative resources. Worse, more than one of its assistant counsels were lawyers who continued to represent this tripartite world.

For example, the Kennedy administration had begun to investigate two scandals in 1963 that might have led to supplanting Lyndon Johnson as a vice-presidential candidate in 1964. The first was the scandal developing around the TFX fighter plane. The contract for the TFX (then called the largest contract in the history of a government) was given to General Dynamics in Fort Worth because of the corrupt Texan military-industrial lobbyists. The second scandal involved Bobby Baker, who had been a key aide to Johnson, and the systematic corruption of congressmen and others—supplying them with money and women. These scandals were converging, and they threatened to ruin Johnson's career. On November 20, two days before the Kennedy assassination, the chairman of the Senate Investigating Committee, Senator John L. McClellan, said that the committee would meet back in the same room one week later; but instead of meeting one week later, it did not meet again for as long as Lyndon Johnson was president.

In fact one of the first people Oswald contacted when he returned to the Dallas-Fort Worth area in 1962 was someone associated with industrial security for General Dynamics. Under the circumstances, it was virtually a conflict of interest for Albert Jenner—lawyer for both General Dynamics and its largest shareholder (the mob-linked Henry Crown)—to have served as he did as assistant counsel to the Warren Commission.

**Tikkun:** Well, lots of people had motives. I can imagine that there were also people who had motives to kill Nixon, Carter, or Reagan as well.

**Scott:** Yes, I believe that there were many disparate motives for killing the president.

**Tikkun:** It seems hard to believe that there was a gathering of people who sat down together and conspired, and that at such a meeting there were leaders of the CIA, the Pentagon, organized crime, and corporations, sitting together in a room and saying, "Let's kill the president."

**Scott:** I don't claim that there was such a meeting, least of all one of CIA or Pentagon *leaders*. I do see a smaller,

He was referring to his Bay of Pigs role not to

Sturgis is a big kid who had nothing to do with the cover-up

middle-level conspiracy, including people inside and outside the government who were able to induce a cover-up not so much with their own power and leadership, but because of their knowledge of how the system would behave. Important to this was a perception the plotters shared with colleagues not that they were overthrowing the existing political order, but rather that the Kennedy brothers were disrupting existing political arrangements—most of them unacknowledged or “deep”—to a degree that had become intolerable.

*silly*  
**Tikkun:** Imagine that a group of people from the military-industrial complex, including business, the CIA, the Mafia, and the Pentagon all said in the course of a conversation how much they wished Kennedy were dead and Johnson were president. If someone at that meeting said that people in Fort Worth would sure be happy if that happened, that people who depend on military jobs would be happy—even if someone had said that they sure wished someone would make it happen—all this would still not add up to a conspiracy to kill the president. Even if someone at that meeting had then said to specific assassins, “I think all aspects of the government and the business community and the Pentagon are behind this, and I can tell you that they said so at a meeting I attended, so now go kill him,” this would still not be a conspiracy to kill the president, because the participants in that meeting would not have planned or authorized any overt acts and would not be legally responsible for anyone who left the meeting and turned this talk into action. So you have to be thinking that something *more* than this happened. That is the part that is difficult to believe.

*fake*  
*fake*  
*fake*  
**Scott:** I think there had to have been conspiratorial planning. Part of this would have involved preparing for the identification of Lee Harvey Oswald as the assassin. This involved controlling his behavior in New Orleans in August 1963, and later in Dallas. We now know quite a lot about the FBI-linked address in New Orleans, 544 Camp Street, that Oswald stamped on his pro-Castro literature; and we can reasonably argue that he was an informant acting for a private investigator (Guy Banister of 544 Camp Street), who in turn reported to the FBI on pro-Castro activities. Virtually all of Oswald’s conflicting provocative and political activities in 1963—attempting to infiltrate a secret anti-Castro training camp, ordering guns by mail from gun shops that were under federal investigation, approaching Cubans in Dallas who were involved in gun-running—are most logically explained by this hypothesis: Oswald was an informant being directed in connection with government-sponsored investigations. (Two witnesses later testified

*who? where? Not in JFK invest. photos*

*not so*  
under oath that Oswald used the phrase “casa nostra” in August 1963, at a time when “cosa nostra” and “causa nostra” were being used in FBI memos, but not yet by the general public—Joe Valachi would not go public with it until a Senate hearing one month later. The fact that the mob had indeed backed the anti-Castro activity Oswald was asking about, although known by the FBI, did not become common knowledge until years later. So Oswald could hardly have acted as a “loner.”)

*not so*  
Meanwhile, and probably unknown to Oswald, the documented trail of his activities appears to have been coordinated to prepare him for a role as the patsy in a high-level assassination plot, whose documented status as an informant for government agencies would help ensure that the truth would be covered up. Only those who controlled Oswald’s movements could have arranged for that. *nobody did from what is known*

*fake*  
*fake*  
This planning also involved knowing the parade route, or even shaping it, so that it would be within shooting distance of Lee Harvey Oswald’s workplace. It involved salting the secret government files on Oswald, before as well as after the assassination, with false but plausible evidence linking Oswald to both Cuban and Soviet intelligence. We know quite a lot about this; and we can say categorically that the activities of the CIA station in Mexico, including both Chief of Station Win Scott and its officer David Phillips, should be looked at much more closely, even though both men are now dead. It may turn out that their apparently conspiratorial behavior was in response to provocations by unidentified third parties manipulating them; but to learn this would bring us closer to those who coordinated the crime. *fake*

*if we're the traditional route*  
Another area to look at is the apparently conspiratorial manipulation of Marina Oswald’s testimony right after the assassination, while she was still being hidden from the FBI. We know that one of her alleged translators was actually coaching and correcting what she said in Russian. Identically corrected language came from another translator, who had for some reason been selected for the job by the head of Army Intelligence Reserve in Dallas. He was a Dallas oil man who had business links to such men as the owner of the Texas School Book Depository (and through him to the man who bought stock in his own aerospace corporation). One veteran member of Army Intelligence Reserve apparently helped plan the parade route, and was present with another member at the scene of the shooting on November 22. For some reason, Army Intelligence files in Texas also held false and inflammatory information about Oswald and Cuba obtained from the Dallas police, some of whom were members of Army Intelligence Reserve. Army Intelligence never gave these files to the Warren Commission, even when ordered to do so, and later destroyed them. *false*

*false*

Army Intelligence was censured for this by the House Committee on Assassinations. There is much more that could still be learned in this area, such as the name of the Army Intelligence officer who spent the morning of November 22 with James Hosty, the FBI agent whose name was in Oswald's notebook. Under instructions from the Bureau, Hosty later destroyed a note from Oswald to the FBI.

**Tikkun:** Why have Americans been avoiding this for so long? *if no could what was not to be avoided*

**Scott:** Because not to avoid it would require facing the deep politics of this country and facing the socially unthinkable. You cannot think these thoughts, follow the logic of these possibilities, without risking being seen as no longer a responsible person. I have a very close friend, a very decent and intelligent person, who recently told me, "I have not seen the movie *JFK* and I have no intention of doing so. I am extremely angry at it. I can see that it's playing to the crowd, which so much wants to believe in conspiracies for psychological reasons." And I said to him, "You are normally such an empirical guy and you normally draw your conclusions from the evidence. Here you are telling me that you refuse to look at the evidence. Your very accurate description of why some people believe in conspiracies can be just as easily turned against people like yourself, for whom it is extremely painful to conceive of a conspiracy, and who therefore prefer to suppress the evidence. Can't you see that the psychological explanation works equally both ways?" And he couldn't.

I'm sure that in reading this interview your readers are likely to be testing the limits of their own resistance.

*stand not both been done*

And since I have not attempted here to lay out the full set of facts—it would take a book and not just an interview to detail all the circumstances that prove a cover-up and strongly indicate a conspiracy to kill the president—I can imagine that it's just as hard for them as it is for anyone who has lived in this country since 1963 and who has made their own peace with the status quo to actually face the full meaning of what I'm saying. And that includes me, because I see in myself the desire to avoid really thinking about this seriously, fully confronting what is at stake, and fully facing the consequences of living in a society where there are still forces at work strenuously trying to discredit the Stone movie, just as they used to try to discredit any theory other than that of the lone assassin.

Most (perhaps all) of those engaged in this denial may have no conscious relationship to people involved in the assassination. Nevertheless, the content of what is now being denied must be addressed, and the truth established, as the best way to restore confidence in the political procedures of our partly open society. In addition to the files stored by the House Committee on Assassinations, and the more important files they have seen but not retained (such as the apparently erroneous and inflammatory CIA file on Paulino Sierra Martinez), we should be sure to obtain all relevant files from other agencies, including all of the undisclosed Vietnam policy documents for 1963. It appears more and more likely that key documents are missing, including those pertaining to the planning for U.S. escalation (unknown to Kennedy) while Kennedy was still alive. If we are to be persuaded that this gap in the record is unrelated to the deep politics of the assassination, nothing short of full disclosure and explanation will suffice. □

## The Spiritual Truth of JFK

Peter Gabel

*I see no relevance in this felby talk*

*after inserting on the opposite ↓*

**O**liver Stone's *JFK* is a great movie, but not because it "proves" that John F. Kennedy was killed by a conspiracy. Stone himself has acknowledged that the movie is a myth—a countermyth to the myth produced by the Warren Commission—but a myth that contains what Stone calls a spiritual truth. To understand that spiritual truth, we must look deeply into the psychological and social meaning of the

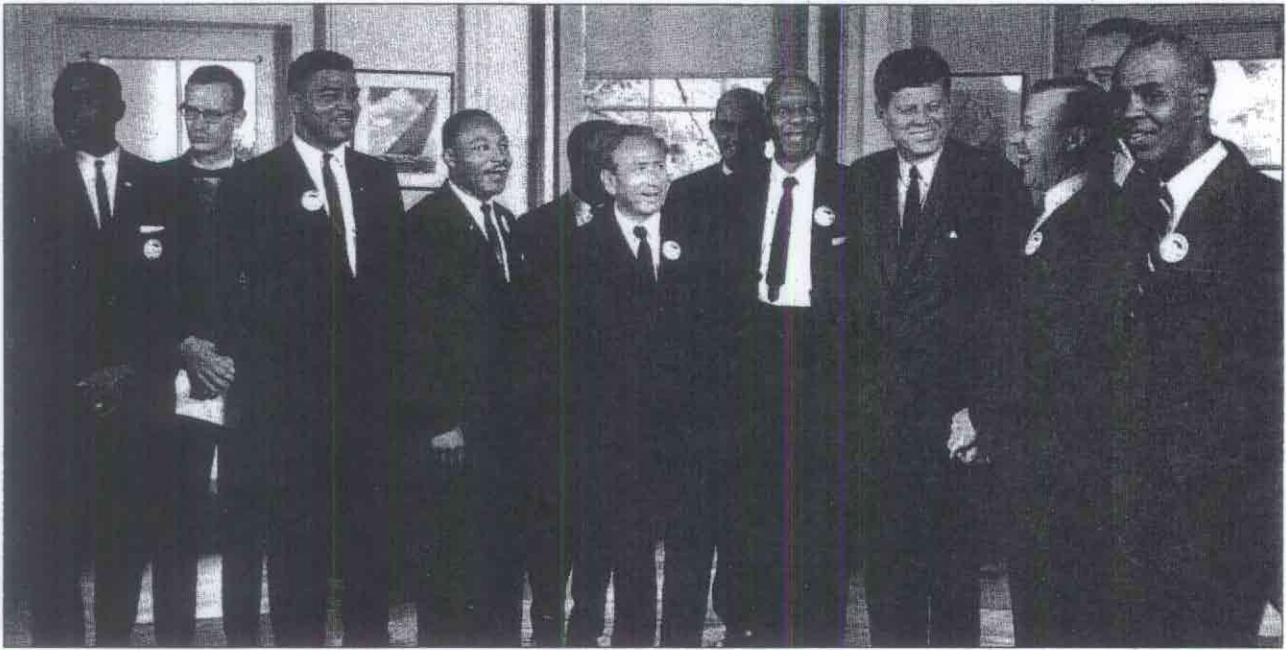
assassination—its meaning for American society at the time that it occurred, and for understanding contemporary American politics and culture.

The spiritual problem that the movie speaks to is an underlying truth about life in American society—the truth that we all live in a social world characterized by feelings of alienation, isolation, and a chronic inability to connect with one another in a life-giving and powerful way. In our political and economic institutions, this alienation is lived out as a feeling of being "underneath"

*i.e., tells us the truth*

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*Peter Gabel is president of New College of California and associate editor of Tikkun.*



*JFK meets with SNCC chair John Lewis, SCLC's Martin Luther King, Jr., Rabbi Joachim Prinz, UAW's Walter Reuther, NAACP's Roy Wilkins, and other leaders of the civil-rights movement's March on Washington less than three months before the assassination.*

and at an infinite distance from an alien external world that seems to determine our lives from the outside. True democracy would require that we be actively engaged in ongoing processes of social interaction that strengthen our bonds of connectedness to one another, while at the same time allowing us to realize our need for a sense of social meaning and ethical purpose through the active remaking of the no-longer "external" world around us. But we do not yet live in such a world, and the isolation and distance from reality that envelops us is a cause of immense psychological and emotional pain, a social starvation that is in fact analogous to physical hunger and other forms of physical suffering.

One of the main psychosocial mechanisms by which this pain, this collective starvation, is denied is through the creation of an imaginary sense of community. Today this imaginary world is generated through a seemingly endless ritualized deference to the Flag, the Nation, the Family—pseudocommunal icons of public discourse projecting mere images of social connection that actually deny our real experience of isolation and distance, of living in sealed cubicles, passing each other blankly on the streets, while managing to relieve our alienation to some extent by making us feel a part of something. Political and cultural elites—presidents and ad agencies—typically generate these images of pseudocommunity, but we also play a part in creating them because, from the vantage point of our isolated positions—if we have not found some alternative community of meaning—we need them to provide what

sense of social connection they can. We have discussed this phenomenon in *Tikkun* many times before, emphasizing recently, for example, the way David Duke is able to recognize and confirm the pain of white working-class people and thereby help them overcome, in an imaginary way, their sense of isolation in a public world that leaves them feeling invisible.

**I**n the 1950s, the alienated environment that I have been describing took the form of an authoritarian, rigidly anticommunist mentality that coexisted with the fantasized image of a "perfect" America—a puffed-up and patriotic America that had won World War II and was now producing a kitchen-culture of time-saving appliances, allegedly happy families, and technically proficient organizations and "organization men" who dressed the same and looked the same as they marched in step toward the "great big beautiful tomorrow" hailed in General Electric's advertising jingle of that period. It was a decade of artificial and rigid patriotic unity, sustained in large part by an equally rigid and pathological anticommunism; for communism was the "Other" whose evil we needed to exterminate or at least contain to preserve our illusory sense of connection, meaning, and social purpose. As the sixties were later to make clear, the cultural climate of the fifties was actually a massive denial of the desire for true connection and meaning. But at the time the cultural image-world of the fifties was sternly held in place by a punitive and threatening system of authoritarian male hierarchies,



symbolized most graphically by the McCarthy hearings, the House Un-American Activities Committee, and the person of J. Edgar Hoover.

**I**n this context, the election of John F. Kennedy and his three years in office represented what I would call an opening-up of desire. I say this irrespective of his official policies, which are repeatedly criticized by the Left for their initial hawkish character, and irrespective also of the posthumous creation of the Camelot myth, which does exaggerate the magic of that period. The opening-up that I am referring to is a feeling that Kennedy was able to evoke—a feeling of humor, romance, idealism, and youthful energy, and a sense of hope that touched virtually every American alive during that time. It was this feeling—"the rise of a new generation of Americans"—that more than any ideology threatened the system of cultural and erotic control that dominated the fifties and that still dominated the governmental elites of the early sixties—the FBI, the CIA, even elements of Kennedy's own cabinet and staff. Kennedy's evocative power spoke to people's longing for some transcendent community and in so doing, it allowed people to make themselves vulnerable enough to experience both hope and, indirectly, the legacy of pain and isolation that had been essentially sealed from public awareness since the end of the New Deal.

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*You don't have to be a conspiracy theorist to find it odd that Oswald's guilt was immediately taken for granted, with no witnesses and no legal proceeding of any kind.*

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Everyone alive at the time of the assassination knows exactly where they were when Kennedy was shot because, as it is often said, his assassination "traumatized the nation." But the real trauma, if we move beyond the abstraction of "the nation," was the sudden, violent loss for millions of people of the part of themselves that had been opened up, or had begun to open up during Kennedy's presidency. As a sixteen-year-old in boarding school with no interest in politics, I wrote a long note in my diary asking God to help us through the days ahead, even though I didn't believe in God at the time. And I imagine that you, if you were alive then, no matter how cynical you may have sometimes felt since then about politics or presidents or the "real" Kennedy

himself, have a similar memory preciously stored in the region of your being where your longings for a better world still reside.

In this issue, Peter Dale Scott gives an account of the objective consequences of the assassination, of the ways that the nation's anticommunist elites apparently reversed Kennedy's beginning efforts to withdraw from Vietnam and perhaps through his relationship with Khrushchev to thaw out the addiction to blind anti-communist rage—an addiction that, as he saw during the Cuban missile crisis, could well have led to a nuclear war. But for these same elites, the mass-psychological consequences of the assassination posed quite a different problem from that of reversing government policy—namely, the need to find a way to reconstitute the image of benign social connection that could reform the imaginary unity of the country on which the legitimacy of government policy depends. In order to contain the desire released by the Kennedy presidency and the sense of loss and sudden disintegration caused by the assassination, government officials had to create a process that would rapidly "prove"—to the satisfaction of people's emotions—that the assassination and loss were the result of socially innocent causes.

**H**ere we come to the mass-psychological importance of Lee Harvey Oswald and the lone gunman theory of the assassination. As Stone's movie reminds us in a congeries of rapid-fire, post-assassination images, Oswald was instantly convicted in the media and in mass consciousness even before he was shot by Jack Ruby two days after the assassination. After an elaborate ritualized process producing twenty-six volumes of testimony, the Warren Commission sanctified Oswald's instant conviction in spite of the extreme implausibility of the magic bullet theory, the apparently contrary evidence of the Zapruder film, and other factual information such as the near impossibility of Oswald's firing even three bullets (assuming the magic bullet theory to be true) with such accuracy so quickly with a manually cocked rifle. You don't have to be a conspiracy theorist, nor do you have to believe any of the evidence marshaled together by conspiracy theorists, to find it odd that Oswald's guilt was immediately taken for granted within two days of the killing, with no witnesses and no legal proceeding of any kind—and that his guilt was later confidently affirmed by a high-level Commission whose members had to defy their own common sense in order to do so. The whole process might even seem extraordinary considering that we are talking about the assassination of an American president.

But it is not so surprising if you accept the mass-psychological perspective I am outlining here—the

perspective that Kennedy and the Kennedy years had elicited a lyricism and a desire for transcendent social connection that contradicted the long-institutionalized forces of emotional repression that preceded them. The great advantage of the lone gunman theory is that it gives a *nonsocial* account of the assassination. It takes the experience of trauma and loss and momentary social disintegration, isolates the evil source of the experience in one antisocial individual, and leaves the image of society as a whole—the “imaginary community” that I referred to earlier—untarnished and still “good.” From the point of view of those in power, in other words, the lone gunman theory reinstates the legitimacy of existing social and political authority as a whole because it silently conveys the idea that our elected officials and the organs of government, among them the CIA and the FBI, share our innocence and continue to express our democratic will. But from a larger psychosocial point of view, the effect was to begin to close up the link between desire and politics that Kennedy had partially elicited, and at the same time to impose a new repression of our painful feelings of isolation and disconnection beneath the facade of our reconstituted but imaginary political unity.

**H**aving said this, I do not want to be understood to be suggesting that there was a conspiracy to set up Oswald in order to achieve this mass-psychological goal. There may well have been a conspiracy to set up Oswald, but no complex theory is required to explain it. And it would be absurd, in my view, to think that the entire media consciously intended to manipulate the American people in the headlong rush to convict Oswald in the press. The point is rather that this headlong rush was something we all—or most of us—participated in because we ourselves, unconsciously, are deeply attached to the status quo, to our legitimating myths of community, and to denying our own alienation and pain. The interest we share with the mainstream media and with government and corporate elites is to maintain, through a kind of unconscious collusion, the alienated structures of power and social identity that protect us from having to risk emerging from our sealed cubicles and allowing our fragile longing for true community to become a public force.

### Genesis

He said it was good  
and we go out  
into it each morning  
carrying our shields,  
not against chaos—  
the midnight terror—  
but against all that was  
created in orderly fashion  
when the lesser light  
and the greater light were hung.

Harvey Shapiro

The great achievement of Oliver Stone's movie is that it uses this traumatic, formative event of the Kennedy assassination—an event full of politically important cultural memory and feeling—to assault the mythological version of American society and to make us experience the forces of repression that shape social reality. The movie may or may not be accurate in its account of what Lyndon Johnson might have known or of the phones in Washington shutting down just before the assassination or of the New Zealand newspaper that mysteriously published Oswald's photographs before he was arrested. But the movie does give a kinetic and powerful depiction of the real historical forces present at the time of the assassination, forces that were in part released by the challenge to the fanatical anticommunism of the fifties that Kennedy to some extent brought about. Through his crosscutting images of the anti-Castro fringe, the civil-rights movement, high and low New Orleans club life, and elites in corporate and government offices who thought they ran the country, Stone uses all his cinematic and political energy to cut through the civics-class version of history and to bring the viewer into sudden contact with the realities of power and alienation that were present at that time and are present in a different form now.

I say this is the great achievement of the movie because no matter who killed Kennedy, it was the conflict between the opening-up of desire that he represented and the alienated need of the forces around him to shut this desire down that caused his death. This struggle was an important part of the meaning of the 1960s, and it provides the link, which Stone draws openly, between John Kennedy's death and the deaths of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy. There is no way for the forces of good to win the struggle between desire and alienation unless people can break through the gauzy images of everything being fine except the lone nuts,

a legitimating ideology that is actually supported by our denial of the pain of our isolation and our collective deference to the system of Authority that we use to keep our legitimating myths in place. Oliver Stone's *JFK* brings us face-to-face with social reality by penetrating the compensatory image-world of mass culture, politics, and journalism. And for that reason it is an important effort by someone whose consciousness was shaped by the sixties to transform and shake free the consciousness of the nineties. □

# The Stoning of Oliver and the Fascination of JFK

Todd Gitlin

No target since Saddam Hussein—not even “the Japanese”—has accumulated more concentrated crossfire from the American press corps during the George Bush years than Oliver Stone. The distinguished media critic Garry Trudeau made the point graphically in an op-ed column in the *New York Times*, depicting Stone cruising down the street under fire from “troubled columnists,” a *Washington Post* writer “with known ties to organized journalism,” drifters “squeezing off cheap shots,” “a professional character assassin” letting loose “a high-powered discharge” and, not least, “George Will, a deranged pedant from Bethesda”—many of these snipers clustered within a few blocks of each other in midtown Manhattan at *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the *New York Times*, the triple overpass of received opinion.

But one of the many extraordinary upshots of the JFK phenomenon is that the fusillade backfired. (A serious conspiracy theorist might say Aha! finding here, on the principle of *cui bono*—who gains?—proof that The Media are all in it together, whence Time-Warner, Stone’s distributor, must have put The Media up to the greatest prepublication publicity campaign in the twentieth century.) For the tirades spelled the name right, JFK, and the ever-renewable magic of the name, in a time when heroes are dead, commanded crowds. The hordes spilled out to the darkened cathedrals where Americans transact the bulk of their public meditation—the great mall-to-mall multiplex where the main current of American culture runs wide if not deep. The result is an unprecedented storm of movie talk—a succession of passions. There are people who refuse to see the movie for themselves—another kind of strong opinion. Virtually everyone I talk to has a strong opinion—even two or three, succeeding and contradicting each other. The movie goes on working on you; even its errors are somehow enlivening.

Philip Roth has said that America is full of “animated talk about second-rate movies by first-rate people,” but

in this case the movie under inspection is, in its distinct way—as kinetics, energy field, sheer spectacle—remarkable. It is neither subtle nor coherent but it is something else that people are not normally likely to find at the mall: public-minded, audacious, and *worth talking about*. Unrelenting in its (literally) staggering intricacy of editing, its rhapsody of splicing, the movie spins the viewer into—what? Not submission, for people come out of the darkened theater asking their own *What ifs* and *But what abouts*, drawing their own distinctions between what makes sense and what doesn’t. What the movie accomplishes is immersion—the grainy-textured, wraparound, all-Dolby, realer-than-virtually-real experience.

And so it has become a force field, drawing that part of each of us which suspects that many or most of history’s driving forces are to be found offstage. Stone, righteously insistent on holding *someone* accountable for the dreadful Vietnam War that visited his wounds and obsessions on him, yanks the universe toward him and compels *us*, even by his errors, to argue with him; to ask, “Well, if it didn’t happen this way, do you have a better idea about the unsolved crime of the century? And, by the way, are you not appalled by the spectacle of the official guardians of the public good over three decades shrugging their shoulders?”

A movie is like a drug, a strong movie like a strong drug: When it mixes into the bloodstream, it takes on the coloration of set and setting—personal mind-set and social setting. The film has struck more than a chord—it seems to have struck a whole orchestra, sending the culture into an intense cacophony and vibration. To understand the impact and the fascination, we have to think about the intrinsic properties of the drug, along with the set and the setting.

The easy part is to diagnose the simplistic appeal of the particular version of truth-gathering that Oliver Stone settled on. JFK is, of course, *Mr. Smith Goes After the Military-Industrial Complex*. The audience, in its offended innocence, knows whose body was buried, if not by whom, and wants to know why. One of the most disturbing aspects of the Warren Commission version is that Oswald was undersupplied with motives to kill

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Kennedy. Stone, like many of the conspiracy buffs whose work he made use of, is a connoisseur of big motives. The screen pours them forth—as if it must necessarily follow that the motives of an action must be commensurate with its mythic magnitude. Big acorns do not from little oaks fall. And so we have the movie's canonization of Jim Garrison, its sloppy demonization of Clay Shaw, its neglect of the Oswald-Ruby-Cuban-mob connections, and, moreover, its frequent conversion of hypotheses into pictures that for some viewers take on the weight of thousands of words of evidence and counterhypotheses.

By one account, Stone early on told a Warner executive that the movie he wanted to make about the Kennedy assassination was *Rashomon*, Akira Kurosawa's fable about the impossibility of ever arriving at a single truth. A terrific and most un-Hollywood of ideas—a triangulation of perspectives, a movie about doubt, about what can't (not yet, or—who knows?—ever) be known. Instead, Stone decided to make a melodrama of dawning awareness—the moral triumph of Jim Garrison, his consciousness raised by often inexplicable leaps and bounds, a figure who cannot bear the weight of unimpeachability Stone lays on him. Stone organized his movie along too straight a narrative spine: the truly crackpot hypothesis that hundreds of operatives of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, military intelligence, the CIA, the FBI, the Dallas police, the anti-Castro Cubans, and God-knows-who-else pulled off the perfect political crime with nary a subsequent squeal, a deathbed confession, or a second thought.

But the power and achievement of the film—the power and achievement of any film—is far different from the plausibility of its plot. Raymond Chandler is said to have remarked, on seeing the film version of *The Big Sleep*, that there was one murder left unsolved. Not that it mattered. *As experience*, a movie is not an argument, a court case, or a history. It comes off as an onslaught of impressions. And so Stone argues not so much through logic and point-counterpoint, as through montage and juxtaposition. He has mastered the mobile camera and the action splice. He doesn't know that anyone murdered David Ferrie, but he cuts to the hands forcing the tablets down Ferrie's throat—thereby incurring the criticism that he has dramatized the strictly hypothetical, in grainy black-and-white, claiming in the process that it happened, in fact, in living color. But there is another way to interpret scenes like this, including the scandalous intersplicing of actual Zapruder coverage with remade footage. Consider that Stone might be proposing: If this scene can be imagined, couldn't it, or something like it, have happened? In fact, the whole film—like virtually any docudrama—can be

read not as necessarily maintaining that *This happened*, but rather, *Consider that things might have happened this way, and what do you make of the odd chance that they did?*

Stone's talent is precisely to manipulate—to lay hands on your synapses and tear them apart. Often his main instrument of argument is the splice. But this doesn't make him dismissible or totalitarian, and it doesn't mean that you have to take the movie as all of a piece. Who knows how many spectators take it that way? By the film's end, he and Kevin Costner have scarcely persuaded me that Jim Garrison is the patron saint of scrupulous investigation. Or that the Donald Sutherland character, X, apparently based on Colonel L. Fletcher Prouty, was the only man standing in the way of the megaconspiracy; or that the Vietnam War was the stake; or that from the moment X was dispatched to the South Pole, Kennedy was, as they say, *history*. Indeed, when I ask friends who approve of the film whether they believe X's scenario, most say, Not at all. They are capable of discerning, of seeing through the splices, of noting the judge's skeptical looks during Costner/Garrison's (fictional) barrage of a soliloquy of a summation. They say, Stone plays fast and loose, he ought to have played slower and tighter. Fine. Stone also has his Garrison say, "I don't have much of a case." His real point, like X's, is to "stir the shitstorm." By applying all his percussive technique and artful cutting, he succeeds where it counts: in shaking one's faith that the world is organized as the Warren Commission—or the *New York Times*—says it is organized.

Or is that too easy in an America that believes in planetary influences, flying saucers, all manner of plots masterminded by God and the Devil and The Media?

The fear that *JFK* plays on and promotes is a rich, often fertile, sometimes energizing, sometimes paralyzing fear in political life—the fear that small groups are making history behind the backs of everyone else. In principle, this kind of fear has its reasons. Fact: Small groups in Washington promoted the war in Vietnam. There *were* secret decisions. True, they took place in an ideological setting that prompted the decision makers to misread drastically the actual place Vietnam, and to construct a cold-war stage set, "Vietnam." But small groups—"conspiracies," if you like—made decisions, ordered attacks, sent troops, lied and lied. Stone's sainted JFK tried and tried again, in camera, to kill Castro. Fact: Conspiracies are routine. What is a conspiracy if not a group working closely together in some kind of more-or-less explicit agreement that the parties undertake to keep secret? The very word can be traced back to physical proximity: From *com*, with, and *spirare*, to

breathe. Conspiracies happen when groups collaborate out of sight. Washington works this way. People who know each other work up strategies, make plans, acquire personnel, make things happen. Consequences unfold—often enough, not the ones intended. And then history zigs when you might have expected it to zag.

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*Aha! is no substitute for  
a living transformation  
of our political climate.*

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*The movie raises this question!*

There is, in short, nothing controversial about the existence of conspiracies. The question the movie raises is: Could Kennedy have been killed by one? And for all but semiprofessional assassination obsessives—for many of them too—the answer has to be, *I don't know*. And that honest answer is itself chilling. The nerve it scrapes is a live nerve. Almost thirty years after a person or persons unknown murdered the president of the United States (one of those persons very possibly being the intelligence agent Oswald, swimming in one or another or twenty different political histories), *we don't know who or why*.

*fake*

**T**he film offers another dangerous satisfaction. To be alive and even half-conscious in the America of 1992 is to know that the world is sour. Arguably it went far worse after November 22, 1963 than it might have been possible to expect before that awful date. Not because Kennedy deserved to be promoted into Camelot. Indeed, Stone has shined Kennedy's armor beyond all historical recognition in order to preserve the movie's Good Guy-Bad Guy melodrama. If Kennedy was indeed, in the fall of 1963, inclined to phase out the Vietnam War—and I remain, at this moment, for the sake of argument, agnostic—it was only after he had pumped up the cold war by inventing a missile gap, boosting the Pentagon's fortunes, priming the Green Berets, and licking his lips over the grey game of counter-insurgency. Kennedy's bright and shining hour, the Camelot invented postmortem by Jacqueline Kennedy and Theodore H. White, is a fiction. But the political world today seems to lack any shine at all. An upbeat scenario is hard to come by. The end of the cold war has produced a resounding anticlimax—even for those who rejoice, following Commander-in-Chief George Herbert Walker Bush, that America won. Even the Gulf War victory has the taste of ashes in the mouths of its partisans.

One reason, then, the movie gets itself talked about is that it follows the white-hatted Garrison down his obsessive track, screaming that in the welter of avoidable

human suffering, *somebody has to be held responsible*. Where there are crimes, there are not only bad ideas, there are criminals. The war was a crime and no one has ever been held accountable. True, the movie's indictment is unconvincing. It cuts to the chase when it needs the mess of history, the false starts of real investigations. It needs more friction, more ambiguity, more maddening uncertainty. But in all its excess, it has the distinct virtue of taking history seriously as something that some do to others. It affirms that there is a national fate. In this, it seems dangerously old-fashioned to a postmodern eye.

**S**o several cheers to Oliver Stone for stoking a public interest in how the history of our time was made—an interest not only in grassy knolls and tramps, in Oswald's handlers, in the capacity of Mannlicher-Carcano rifles, in all the minutiae, but in how the machinery of evil might work. How we would love to see one of the great crimes understood, let alone punished! Love Kennedy or leave him, the assassination in Dealey Plaza was momentous. It is hard for a patriot or a rationalist to bear not knowing who killed the not-so-romantic Kennedy, and a lot of dreams along with him—dreams that, whoever the actual Kennedy was, the public good might be found and fought for, and, not least, that *the world might make sense*.

Instead, in 1992, the world looks opaque. The Vietnam War is reduced to a mythic failure that Bush aimed to rescind with an equally mythic, televisual equivalent for war. In the popular understanding, the Vietnam War is "Vietnam," and the real Vietnam, with its millions of maimed, is no more real to many Americans than it was before American soldiers parachuted in to save freedom. America staggered into and out of Vietnam and learned next to nothing except—in the words of George Bush—that "it," whatever "it" was, shouldn't be done again. And no one seems to care why "it" happened.

Still we know, somewhere beneath the surface, "forces" are at work. Sheiks collect billions, weapons travel, debt-ridden companies die, savings and loans shut down, banks tremble, insurance companies go belly up, and hardly anyone is ever found accountable. Reason, as a political force, is neutered. This is an atmosphere in which all manner of diagrams are being drawn. Neo-Nazis have their diagrams too—Jewish media, interlocking directorates. The crackpots appeal to pure paranoia, the rationality of fools. Discredit them we must, but the longing for rationality won't quit.

So along comes Oliver Stone with his talents, his clues and hypotheses, his splendid actors, and his too-easy answers, and by putting his movie on the national screen he exhibits the fact that the military-industrial complex is not, indeed, all-powerful. (Or are we supposed

none have in the past, none will  
in these files. They did it would feel them  
nothing at all about what got him done

to believe that this Time-Warner operation is a decoy, part of the plot?) More power to those devotees who will proceed to pore through the about-to-be-opened files thanks to Stone. Others are far more knowledgeable than I about the particulars of the Warren Commission and the House Special Committee on Assassinations, and will sift now, perhaps, with new intensity through the work of thoughtful investigators. I am neither a close student of exit-woundology nor a grassy-knollist, and I don't know how many Oswalds there were or are, or what became of anyone's missing brain, Kennedy's or Reagan's, nor am I adept at the literature of the tramps or the Mexico City trip. There are close students of the assassination, of the magic bullet theory, the switched corpse theory, the mob hit theory, whom I respect, and who disagree among themselves about these matters. But one may be skeptical that much of value is to be found unshredded and undoctored in CIA files about the career of Lee Harvey Oswald, say, or FBI files about Jack Ruby. Those who think "The Government," a seamless entity, is capable of killing the president and keeping the secret for three decades surely cannot doubt that this same Government has been capable of shredding some files and concocting others. In the end, it seems almost certain that the murder will remain unsolved. This is intolerable—dramatically unsatisfying—and we are going to have to tolerate it.

How many?  
And this is where we can see what the satisfaction of mapping Big Plots fails to do for the common republican good. The pleasure of conspiracy theories is also their danger. They assure us that everything we see is—by definition—stage-managed. The world of appearances is a sham. Behind the curtain, the Wizard (in the guise of the Trilateral Commission or the Secret Team) is pushing pawns. In this wacky game, anyone who thinks himself a bishop only proves himself a pawn: an appealing idea for rationalists who want to believe that history is both intelligible and strange, and indeed for humanists who believe that individuals—not abstract "classes" or ill-defined "elites"—make history. The conspiracy theorist in each of us relishes the down-and-dirty, the who-said-what-to-whom, the fear and/or the thrill that the line between the paranoid and the realist is precious thin. Conspiracy theorists don't want to hear about the impenetrability or the inversions of history, let alone about accidents or miscalculations. They want names named. They know that history is capable of being driven, managed, pushed. They say: If you doubt that history can be engineered, what you call your commonsense skepticism is the nub of your blindness. You deny one of the deepest forces at work in your psyche, namely, your paranoia.

And there is the stand-off, if we are debating what actually happened. Conspiracy theorists are not so impressed by the other part of the truth—that conspiracies make history, as Marx would have said, *but not in conditions of their own making*. Moreover, if we are to be logical, then X's question, "Who benefited?" is like an express train—once on the track, it's hard to stop. Must every consequential action in history be attributed to its beneficiaries? Was Hitler a creature of Zionists? Stalin a creature of Roosevelt? Did Nixon arrange the assassination of Kennedy, knowing that Johnson would escalate the Vietnam War and thereby leave the country ripe for Nixon's return in 1968? Did the Kennedy camp—Larry O'Brien, for example—strike back by suckering the plumbers into the Watergate? This way lies the hall of mirrors. To ask consistently, *Cui bono?* is to commit oneself to an absolute mania of imponderables. And yet to ask *Cui bono?* inconsistently is to abandon the bright idea of the absolute knowability of history. We are back to square zero. We have no principle to guide a search. The answer to the question *Cui bono?* is not an explanation about how history happens.

Paranoia aside, then, the desire to know the truth of momentous events becomes us as a culture. But suppose, for the sake of argument, that the names were named, the motive unraveled, the grand jury convened, the trial held. Where would we be then, possessed of the truth? Would the Left's feebleness in the last two decades be overcome? I suspect not, any more than the Left was unleashed by Watergate or Iran-Contra, or would be resurrected by proof that the Reagan campaign made a deal with Iran in 1980. Aha! is no substitute for a living transformation of our political climate. To refute the magic bullet theory would not be to develop a theory of political magic. To the despair of historians and conspiracy theorists alike, it is sentimental to think that even the truth, after all this time, will make us free. The murderers did their work and we find ourselves living right now, in the aftermath, where we always live.

And still (one more turn of the screw): One of the central questions facing this anesthetic culture is, Can we as a society find a way to discuss the public business? Do we expect presidential campaigns, say, to ignite our collective political reason? In this setting, JFK does us a service. It starts conversations that must be had. It opens files, reminds us of how many secrets the cold war threw into the deep freeze. It reminds us of the spookiness, the changeability, and yet the human scale, of history. If it triggers nostalgia for Camelot, let it also shake us into doubting official stories—including Jim Garrison's and including those of the former Director of Central Intelligence, George Herbert Walker Bush. □