

JFK: The Movie and the Evidence

TIME

**EXCLUSIVE
INTERVIEW**

**Gorbachev says
he'll fight on,
but he's already**

**A Man
Without
A Country**



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Who Killed J.F.K.?

In an electrifying and troubling new film, Oliver Stone and Kevin Costner reheat the controversy about the Kennedy assassination

By RICHARD CORLISS



*J.F.K. blown away,
What else do I have to say?
—Billy Joel,
We Didn't Start the Fire*

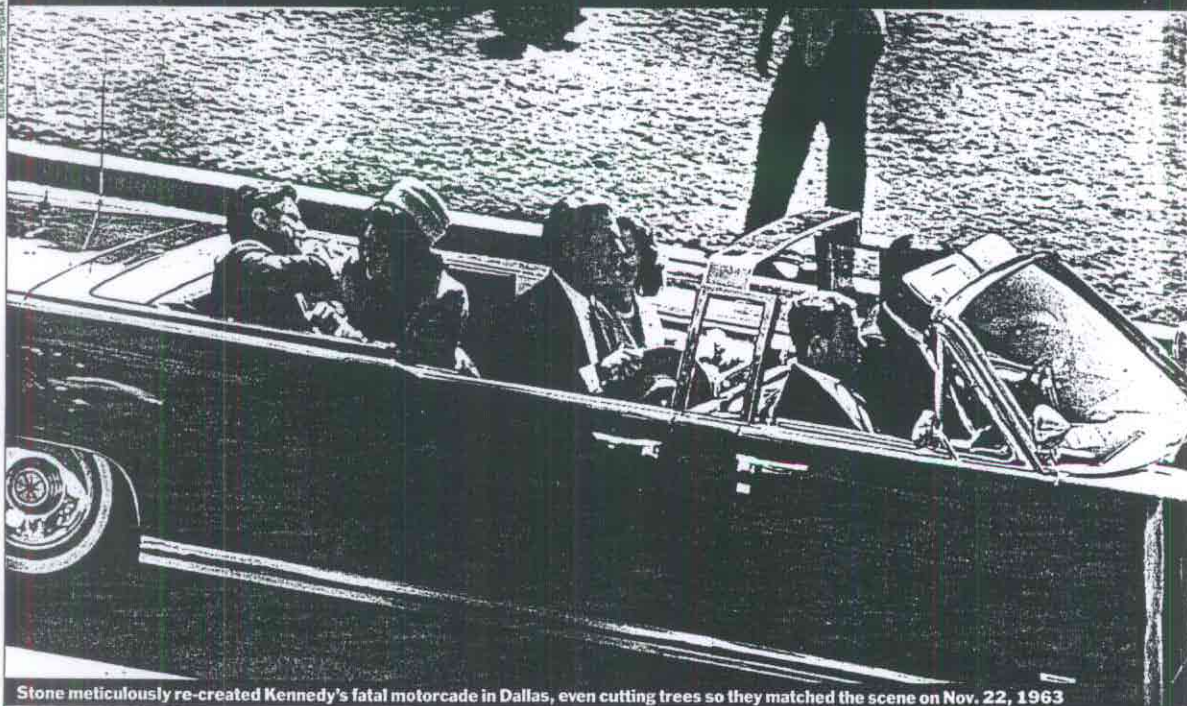
On Nov. 22, 1963, somebody blasted the skull of America open. In a few seconds of rifle fire in Dallas' Dealey Plaza, a time warp gaped. Slapped out of a pretty post-war reverie, we screamed bloody murder.

Oliver Stone screams bloody murder for a living. In his screenplays for *Midnight Express* and *Scarface*, he drew nightscapes of drug paranoia and police brutality. As writer-director of *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July*, the Vietnam vet exorcised his demons by portraying the war as a rite of passage—to fratricide. In *Talk Radio* he suggested that the penalty for a showman's reckless truth telling was to be killed by his audience. Jim Morrison, in *The Doors*, pays a similar fee for fame; the poet's capricious

muse drives him to drugs, madness, death. Oddly enough, Stone's tortured artistic mission—dispensing downers to a movie public famously addicted to escapism—has its upside. He pours so much dramatic juice into the hemlock blender that folks go to his films, and official Hollywood has rewarded Stone with three Oscars.

This past was prologue to his most outsize challenge: explaining the Kennedy assassination to his own satisfaction. Or anyone else's. *JFK*, the electrifying melodrama

How Many Shots Were Fired, and from Where?



Stone meticulously re-created Kennedy's fatal motorcade in Dallas, even cutting trees so they matched the scene on Nov. 22, 1963

THE MOVIE:

Stone's theory is that there were six shots, fired by three teams of gunmen located in the Texas School Book Depository, behind a nearby grassy knoll and in front of the limo. Even if Oswald was involved, the shooting took less than six seconds, not long enough for him to have shot more than twice.

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opening nationwide this week, attracted brickbats months ago when a long article in the *Washington Post* cataloged historical "errors and absurdities" in Stone and Zachary Sklar's screenplay. Assassination scholars ragged Stone for his naiveté, his use of discredited testimony, his reliance on suspect "experts." A *TIME* critic said that if Stone's film "turns out to distort history, he may wind up doing more harm than homage to the memory of the fallen President." Tom Wicker, a *New York Times* columnist, has seen the film and believes it does all that and worse. He calls *JFK* "paranoid and fantastic," full of "wild assertions" and propagating an idea that, "if widely accepted, would be contemptuous of the very constitutional government Mr. Stone's film purports to uphold."

Anybody want to see this movie? Warner Bros. hopes so; the studio (whose parent company also owns *TIME*) helped foot *JFK*'s \$40 million tab. It is also counting on Kevin Costner, America's No. 1 homegrown movie star, to lure audiences to what is at heart a high-voltage civics quiz. Though he doesn't necessarily agree with every notion floated in the film,

Costner is happy to play front man for Stone. "Oliver's a patriot," he says. "And I believe with him that the impact of this movie will be liberating. Any part of the truth—any discussion of what could be the truth—can only make us freer."

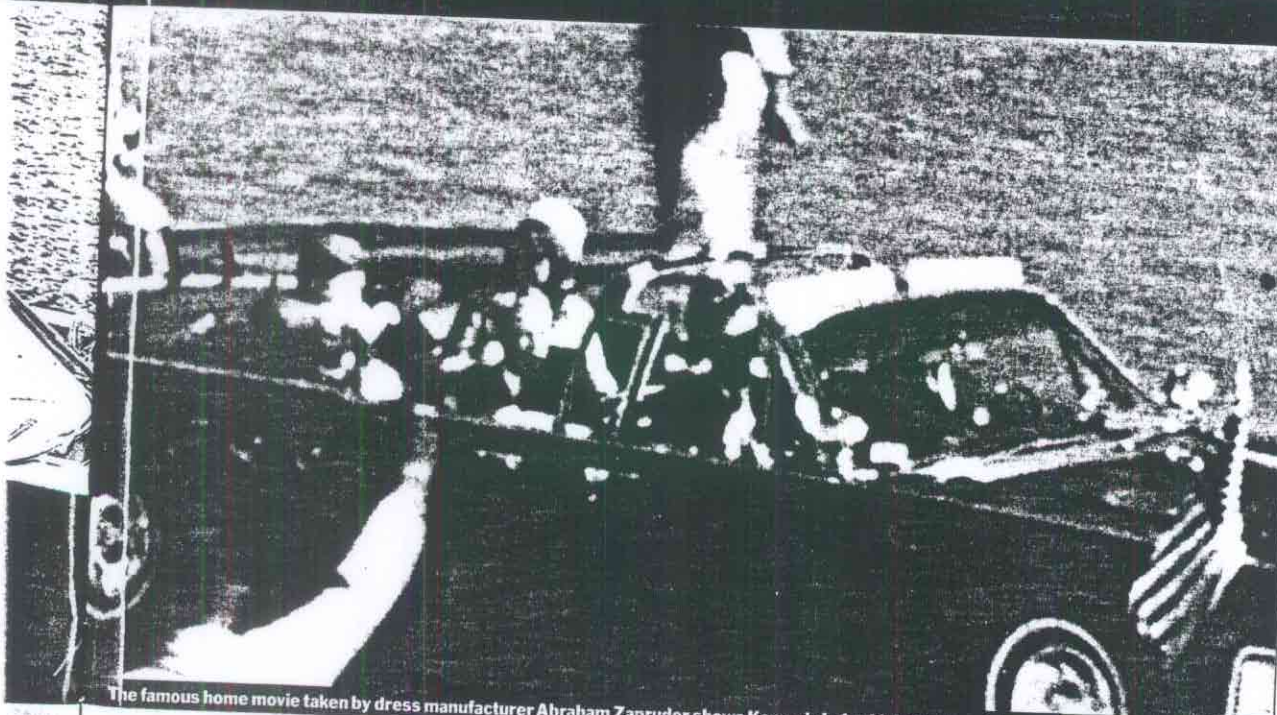
But Costner's coiled heroic presence is one more source of controversy, for the liberal icon of *Dances with Wolves* and *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* is playing Jim Garrison, who as New Orleans district attorney in the late '60s prosecuted the only Kennedy assassination case that ever went to trial. And, quickly, out the window. The jury found the defendant, businessman Clay Shaw, not guilty in less time than last week's West Palm Beach jurors took to exonerate William Kennedy Smith. For the past decade, Garrison (who appears in *JFK* as Chief Justice Earl Warren) has been part of America's conspiracy industry—saint to some, buffoon to others.

In Stone's mind, and in Costner's presence, the Garrison of *JFK* is a hero: pure and simple. Upon learning that Lee Harvey Oswald (Gary Oldman) had spent part of the summer in New Orleans, Garrison questions people who may have known the

accused assailant: a ditsy homosexual named David Ferrie (Joe Pesci), a hooker named Willie O'Keefe (Kevin Bacon), a hipster lawyer (John Candy), an alcoholic private eye (Jack Lemmon)—a lower-depths cast whose connections seem to hint at a dark secret. Perhaps even a conspiracy? Who dares call it treason?

The D.A. does. A dogged sleuth for the truth, Garrison gets tips from "X," a disaffected military man (Donald Sutherland), help from his staff (Michael Rooker, Jay O. Sanders, Laurie Metcalf) and static from his wife (Sissy Spacek). By the time he has brought charges against the elegant debauchee Shaw (Tommy Lee Jones), the movie's Garrison is convinced of the breadth and enormity of this "secret murder at the heart of the American dream."

So, you want to know, who killed the President and connived in the cover-up? Everybody! High officials in the CIA, the FBI, the Dallas constabulary, all three armed services, Big Business and the White House. Everybody done it—everybody but Lee Harvey Oswald. Oh, Oswald was probably a double agent during his "defection" to the U.S.S.R., where he may have provid-

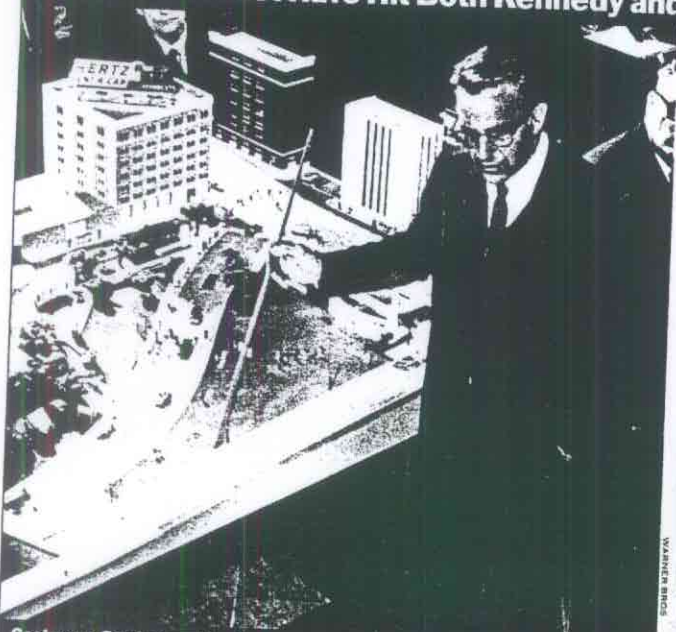


The famous home movie taken by dress manufacturer Abraham Zapruder shows Kennedy being hit in the throat

THE EVIDENCE:

Most witnesses testified that there were only three shots. Others said they heard four, at least one of which came from the grassy knoll. A House panel in 1979 analyzed a motorcycle-radio tape and concluded that a fourth shot did come from the knoll, but a subsequent study disputed this. The Warren Commission said the Zapruder film could be interpreted to mean the shooting took almost eight seconds, giving Oswald ample time to fire three shots.

Could One Bullet Have Hit Both Kennedy and Connally?



Costner as Garrison making his case in court, with a model of Dealey Plaza

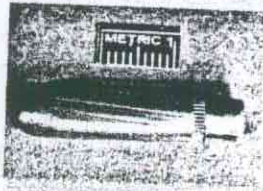
THE MOVIE:

Garrison ridicules the Warren Commission's "magic-bullet" hypothesis by showing the impossible zigzag trajectory it would have had to take and by noting that the bullet in question was found in almost pristine condition. If he was right, there must have been more than three shots.

THE EVIDENCE:

The magic-bullet theory is one of the weakest parts of the Warren Commission's case; tests on animal and human cadavers were never able to show it was plausible. But subsequent studies by a skeptical House panel and by a *Nova* TV documentary indicate that Kennedy and Connally could have been positioned in such a way as to make

it theoretically possible. Neutron-activation tests indicate that the fragments in Connally's wrist did come from the bullet in question.



The "magic bullet"

ed information that helped the Soviets gun down Francis Gary Powers' spy plane. He may also have been in cahoots with anti-Castro Cubans. But he didn't shoot J.F.K.; he didn't even shoot Dallas police officer J.D. Tippit. The one man charged with the Kennedy assassination was precisely what he said he was: "a patsy."

Believe who will. Scoff who chooses. But save your outrage for matters of greater moment than even a major motion picture. It's a tribute to Stone's contentious showmanship that folks are het up about *JFK*, though it is neither the first nor the last movie assault on the Warren Commission Report. The 1973 film *Executive Action* hypothesized that leaders of the military-industrial complex conspired to kill J.F.K. A scheme even more toxic percolated through the 1979 movie *Winter Kills*, based on Richard Condon's novel: that a President very like Jack Kennedy could be assassinated by his own father. In February comes *Ruby*, from a Stephen Davis play about the man who really did shoot Oswald. And in April, *Libra*, based on Don DeLillo's fantasia about Oswald, his mother and the CIA, begins filming under John Malkovich's direction. Earlier this year, *Libra*'s producers claimed that Stone had used his clout to torpedo their production, a charge Stone heatedly denies.

Stone should have shown more confidence in his own film. Whatever one's suspicions about its use or abuse of the evidence, *JFK* is a knockout. Part history book, part comic book, the movie rushes toward judgment for three breathless hours, lassoing facts and factoids by the

thousands, then bundling them together into an incendiary device that would frag any viewer's complacency. Stone's picture is, in both meanings of the word, sensational: it's tip-top tabloid journalism. In its bravura and breadth, *JFK* is seductively enthralling; in its craft, wondrously complex.

Stone assembles and presents his material like a brilliant, eccentric professor, dazzling you with free-form insights even as he's poking you—oops!—in the eye with his pointer. He uses a canny mix of documentary footage (including the Zapruder film) and re-enactments in 8-mm, 16-mm and 35-mm black-and-white and color to buttress, refute or footnote testimony. "We didn't worry about everything not fitting," says co-film editor Joe Hutshing. "The idea was to create a tapestry, with various textures, grain sizes and colors."

The film also employs clever, subtle

sound effects. When, during the first interrogation of Clay Shaw, Garrison springs Willie O'Keefe's name, we hear a *ding-dong!* In story terms, it is a doorbell that cues the prostitute's appearance at Shaw's front door (with a subtextual aural gag: the prancing stud as Avon lady). But it also alerts the viewer that, after much digging, Garrison has come close to pay dirt. "The sound has a subliminal effect," Hutshing says. "It's like perfume—it brings you back to that period."

In his earlier films, Stone could go bats, with prowling cameras and screaming actors; but *JFK* is, for all its bravura, compact and controlled. Perhaps no Hollywood director has made a film with so many speaking parts or data; *JFK* is a crash briefing with great visual aids. If David Ferrie mentions a thunderstorm, Stone will lock it in your mind with a quick image of lightning

Where Did the Fatal Shot Come From?

THE MOVIE:

As shown in the Zapruder film, Kennedy's head lurched back when hit, suggesting that the bullet came from the front and not from the book depository.

THE EVIDENCE:

Kennedy's head does seem to snap back. Defenders of the Warren Commission argue that this does not prove the bullet came from the front; they say the autopsy report and photos make it clear the bullet entered from the rear. The bullet that hit Kennedy's head was found in the limousine, and tests indicated that it came from Oswald's rifle. Moreover, frame 313 of the Zapruder film clearly shows brain matter spraying forward.

Did Oswald Know Ruby, Shaw and Ferrie?



THE MOVIE:

Shaw, Ferrie and Oswald are shown in New Orleans together, and Oswald and Ferrie are shown with Ruby at his Dallas nightclub.

THE EVIDENCE:

Over the years, some witnesses have come forward to say they saw the alleged conspirators together at parties and at a rally in rural Louisiana. This was Garrison's key contention in his 1969 trial of Shaw, but the jury rejected it. Even many conspiracy theorists doubt the credibility of the witnesses.



Above, *JFK*'s Oswald, Ferrie and Ruby; the real Oswald, Ferrie, Ruby and Shaw

splitting the Texas sky. Throughout, Stone juggles fact and supposition with such dervish dexterity that even when he drops a ball, he never loses his intense poise.

As storyteller, Stone is catering a buffet banquet of conspiracy theories; you can gorge on them or just graze. He tells his audience what every entertainer says: entertain this notion. Suspend disbelief. Let's pretend. What if? Superficially, movies are a persuasive medium because they exist in the present tense, not the conditional. Each picture is happening before our eyes; each Stone film fantasy is, for the moment it is on the screen, the moviegoer's reality.

But because films are fictions—because even a naive viewer knows Kevin Costner is an actor playing a moviemaker's interpretation of a man named Jim Garrison—the events they portray need not be factual, or even probable; they must only

be plausible. Through his art and passion, Stone makes *JFK* plausible, and turns his thesis of a coup d'état into fodder for renewed debate. The movie recognizes that history is not only what we are told to believe; often it is gossip that becomes gospel.

Does Stone see himself as a political director? "Not at all," he says. "I am trying to be a dramatist." And a dramatist looks for a pattern. Coincidences, random motives and the privately festering grudges of a lone nut may be the small sad facts behind the Kennedy assassination, but they satisfy no one's demands—least of all Stone's—for the coherence of myth. The director needs a big-picture view to make his big picture work. And a hero like the movie's Garrison needs a martyr like the movie's Kennedy. The President must be restored to Camelot; the philanderer of revisionist history must be revised again, shown in home movies as a

loving husband, a doting dad. More important, he must be a crusader who not only is determined to achieve his noble aims but also is aware of mortal danger from his enemies. If he was killed by Oswald alone, then Kennedy was no martyr—just the victim of really rotten luck.

Stone argues that Kennedy was so progressive, so "soft on communism" (and on Castro) and so popular that the right-wing establishment was driven to kill him. But this is a romantic, perhaps fantasy, J.F.K.; he can as easily be seen as a cold warrior with star quality. He believed in the domino theory of communism storming across Asia; he exercised superpower machismo by eyeballing the Soviet Union over its Cuban missiles until Khrushchev blinked. He took flak from liberals for appointing segregationist Southerners as judges in federal courts. Martin Luther King Jr., not Kennedy, was the moral leader of the civil rights movement—rights confirmed only in Lyndon Johnson's tenure.

Stone's Garrison is semifictional as well, and open to charges of distortion. As played with understated power by Costner, in his specs and rumpled jacket, Garrison is the ordinary decent man whose search for truth makes him extraordinary in a time of national fear and cowardice. Borrowing the quest plot from *Hamlet* (or *Star Wars*), *JFK* sends its hero out to avenge the murder of his spiritual father, Jack Kennedy. "This is not a biography of Jim Garrison," Costner says. "He was just the flagpole Oliver tied the events around. Was he right? I'm not sure. I tried to play him without judging him. That's somebody else's job.

Was the Autopsy Rigged?

THE MOVIE:

Kennedy is moved to Bethesda Naval Hospital near Washington over objections of a Dallas official, and the autopsy is supervised by top military commanders intent on covering up the evidence. The notes are then burned, and the President's brain disappears.

THE EVIDENCE:

Indeed, Kennedy's body was ordered moved to Bethesda Naval Hospital, some autopsy notes were destroyed, and the whereabouts of the brain is unknown. The autopsy photos taken at Bethesda indicate a shot from the rear, but they vary from the recollection of some doctors in Dallas. There have been lingering allegations—but no hard evidence—that someone tampered with the wounds on Kennedy's body.

Was It a Military Plot to Keep the U.S. in Vietnam?



THE MOVIE:

A man identified as "X" tells Garrison that Kennedy was the victim of CIA and military officers who objected to his secret plans to withdraw from Vietnam and to scuttle plots against Fidel Castro. The movie implies that the masterminds were Allen Dulles, whom Kennedy fired as CIA director; General Charles Cabell, who was deputy CIA director and the brother of the mayor of Dallas; and a mystery man called "General Y."

THE EVIDENCE:

"X" is based on a former Air Force colonel named Fletcher Prouty, who was a director of special operations at the Pentagon in the early 1960s and is now a prominent conspiracy theorist. "General Y" is based on General Edward Lansdale, a celebrated CIA officer who ran the covert "Operation Mongoose" program to overthrow Castro and later served in Vietnam.

Kennedy confided to certain antiwar Senators that he planned to withdraw from Vietnam if re-elected; but publicly he proclaimed his opposition to withdrawal. In October 1963 he signed a National Security Action Memo—NSAM 263—that ordered the withdrawal of 1,000 of the 16,000 or so U.S. military "advisers."

After the assassination, Lyndon Johnson let the 1,000-man withdrawal proceed, but it was diluted so that it involved mainly individuals due for rotation rather than entire combat units. A few days after taking office he signed a new action memo—NSAM 273—that was tougher than a version Kennedy had been considering; it permitted more extensive covert military actions against North Vietnam. No one has come forward, however, with any direct knowledge of a military or CIA conspiracy.

Sutherland as "X"; the real-life Prouty (the model for "X") and Lansdale

My job was to validate him as a character. It's up to the moviegoer to decide whether what he says is valid."

What wasn't valid, some supporters of conspiracy scenarios charge, was the real Garrison's tactics. In mythologizing the D.A., *JFK* ignores allegations that he bullied witnesses and suppressed a polygraph test. These moral zits would deface the hero's image—and Stone's too, since he likely sees himself as a modern movie Garrison, a brave man vilified for unearthing the sordid, cleansing truth. If Stone wants to raise the Garrison flagpole and sit on it, waving elaborate theories as if they were the Stars and Stripes, fine. But he should make his method clear to the audience. *JFK* needs to carry the warning: This is a drama based on fact and conjecture.

Under its breath, the movie says as much. It prefixes some scenes with a "For all we know, it could have been..." or a "Let's just for a moment speculate, shall we?" Stone embraces contradictions, or maybe he just trucks over them. What Garrison tells his staff, Stone tells his viewers: "Now we're through the looking glass here, people. White is black, and black is white." But the film's true epigraph might be the counsel that "X" gives Garrison: "Don't take my word. Do your own work—your own thinkin'."

"Nobody is claiming that the movie is the truth," says Sklar, the editor of Garrison's book, *On the Trail of the Assassins*. "But Oliver wanted to find out as much as he could about the assassination and get close to the full truth, which he, like many people, thinks has never been told."

Stone hired Sklar to work on the script, which was also based on Jim Marrs' study,

Crossfire: The Plot That Killed Kennedy. He boiled Sklar's 550-page first draft down to 160 pages and interpolated extensive flashbacks, in the style of *Rashomon* and *Z*. By April 1991, when filming began, Stone, Sklar and co-producer A. Kitman Ho had interviewed more than 200 people.

The actors became detectives too. "It's like being a journalist," Oldman said of his research into Oswald's character. "We all became assassination buffs. Marina [Oswald's Russian-born widow] had a tape that she let me see. It had a section leading up to the line, 'I'm just a patsy.' Oliver saw it, and he said, 'Let's restage that scene.'" Spacek spent time with Garrison's ex-wife Liz. "The sense I got from her," the actress says, "is of a woman living the life she wanted to live until her husband's obsession came through. She was proud of Jim, but his obsession went so far."

On location in Dealey Plaza, actors and crew filmed the motorcade re-enactment with super-8 movie cameras. "The idea," says co-film editor Pietro Scalia, "was to create a point of view so that this section has an amateurish look." After much wrangling, the *JFK* company secured use of the Texas School Book Depository, from which shots were fired on Nov. 22. The sixth floor had become a museum, so the moviemakers used the seventh floor there and, for appropriate perspective of the motorcade, the sixth floor of an adjacent building. Stone also filmed at the Dallas police headquarters, where Jack Ruby killed Oswald. "The police were very cooperative," says production designer Victor Kempster. "They let us strip out

computers in the offices and put in 1960s furniture. That included changing doorways to fit the film footage."

The crucial historical footage was the Zapruder film, for a copy of which Stone paid \$40,000. "It's the most important visual record we have of the assassination," says Sklar. "To make a movie without it is to miss a lot." Over and over, at the climax of *JFK*, Garrison plays the fatal shot—tragedy as therapy—to help solve the mystery and restore the fearful impact of the day that yanked a nation out of its cocoon of innocence. For all its cynicism, or even paranoia, about official venality, the film is a call for a kind of informed innocence. Stone says: Open your eyes wide, like a child's. Look around. See what fits. And Costner's summation is right out of an old Frank Capra movie in its declaration of principle in the face of murderous odds. Lost causes, as Capra's Mr. Smith said, are the only causes worth fighting for.

To Stone's old enemies, *JFK* may be another volatile brew of megalomania and macho sentiment. To his new critics, the film may seem deliriously irresponsible, madly muttering like a street raver. But to readers of myriad espionage novels and political-science fictions, in which the CIA or some other gentlemen's cabal is always the villain, the movie's thesis will be a familiar web spinning of high-level malevolence. *JFK* is Ludlum or Le Carré, but for real.

Or—crucial distinction—for real. Memorize this mantra, conspiracy buffs and guardians of public respectability: *JFK* is only a movie. And, on its own pugnacious terms—the only terms Oliver Stone would ever accept—a terrific one. —Reported by Patrick E. Cole/Los Angeles

Plunging into the Labyrinth

Feisty filmmaker Oliver Stone counters criticisms of the conspiracy theory and cover-up scenario in his "tsunami wave" of a movie, JFK

By LANCE MORROW and MARTHA SMILGIS



Q. In JFK you commingle real news footage with re-created historical scenes. Do you consider the film a docudrama, a work of fact or fiction?

A. Am I a zebra? Am I a giraffe? What color are my spots? These are categorizations, and I tend to resist them. During the trial Jim Garrison says, let's speculate for a moment what happened that day. He goes on to speculate as to the events as they might have happened with more than one shooter. So I'm giving you a detailed outlaw history or counter-myth. A myth represents the true inner spiritual meaning of an event. I think the Warren Commission was a myth, and I think this movie, hopefully, if it's accepted by the public, will at least move people away from the Warren Commission and consider the possibility that there was a coup d'état that removed President Kennedy.

Q. Do you feel you as a filmmaker have a responsibility to historical fact?

A. Whenever you start to dictate to an artist his "social responsibility" you get into an area of censorship. I think the artist has the right to interpret and reinterpret history and the events of his time. It's up to the artist himself to determine his own ethics by his own conscience.

Q. Are you comfortable with this film in your own conscience?

A. Totally. I dispute the "objective" version of events in Dealey Plaza as stated by the Warren Commission. The entire Warren Commission Report, 26 volumes, is a rat's nest of conflicting facts, and that's been pointed out not just by me but by many critics before me.

Q. Is it accurate to say that you think the assassinations of John Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy are linked?

A. I think the removal of the three most progressive leaders of the '60s during a time of bitterness and dissension and civil war in this country is very much tied into the assassination. I use the term civil war in its full implications, going back to the 1960s, where we were divided between hawks and doves, hippies and straights. These three leaders were pulling out of the war in Vietnam and shaking up the country. Civil rights, the cold war itself, everything was in question.

There's no doubt that these three killings are linked, and it worked. That's what's amazing. They pulled it off.

Q. Who's "they"? Who do you think has profited from the Kennedy and King assassinations?

A. As shown in the movie, the money that was involved was enormous by any standard. Cold war money. It's not just Vietnam money. It's military-industrial

“I'm giving you a detailed outlaw history or counter-myth. A myth represents the true inner spiritual meaning of an event.”

money. It's nuclear money. It's the American war economy that Eisenhower warned us about, that came into being in this country in the 1940s, after World War II. It's also the continuation of the covert state, the invisible government that operates in this country and seems to be an unelected parallel government to our legitimate government. The CIA and military intelligence all got out of hand somewhere in the 1960s. It suddenly reached another level, where the concept of assassination—the wet affair, liquidation—became the vogue.

Q. When you say a parallel government, do you mean a specific arm of the Executive Branch, like "special ops"?

A. It's a moving, fluid thing, a series of forces at play. It's not necessarily individuals. Military-industrial interests are at stake. That puts into play certain forces. We have had many incidents recently, with Oliver North, with Richard Secord, the whole Iran-*contra* business. We've seen the scale on which arms are moved around the world. We've seen secret deals. There's more going on than ever meets the eye,

and there's more going on than is ever written about in the newspapers.

Q. Why did you pick Garrison as the focal point of JFK?

A. Because in Jim I found a worthy protagonist, a vehicle to include all the research that was done in the case. I respect Jim. He put himself out there and led with his chin. His was a flawed investigation, but he did his best. He was one of a very few who early on said that the government did it. Which was an astounding statement in 1967, a very scary one.

Q. It's still an astounding statement. Americans have the strong sense that their government is their government. They don't have the sense that, say, the Russians have had for generations, that the government belongs to the people who have seized power.

A. You really think that? Maybe you're right. I may be in the minority. I just think the American people smell a rat.

Q. Given our motley society, why couldn't a lone gunman have shot Kennedy? Why does it have to be a conspiracy?

A. Assassins through history have always proclaimed their act. They've been proud of it. They've killed for a political reason. But Oswald always said, "I didn't do it. I'm a patsy." And we have an enormous accumulation of physical evidence that makes it very difficult to buy that one gunman could have done that kind of shooting job.

Q. You stood in the window with that rifle and worked the bolt?

A. Not only that, but we created the motorcade. We had a massive motorcade moving through that ravine called Dealey Plaza. We fired. We heard the shots and echoes too. We did more of an enactment than the FBI ever did, and by the way, their best marksmen were never able to match Oswald's feat.

Q. In JFK the media, including TIME and LIFE, cover up the assassination conspiracy. Do you truly believe the press was CIA-infiltrated?

A. I feel that the American reaction to the crime was to simplify it, to deal with good guys and bad guys and a lone gunman and John Wayne theatrics. The European press was much more skeptical, because they saw in this assassination political forces at play.

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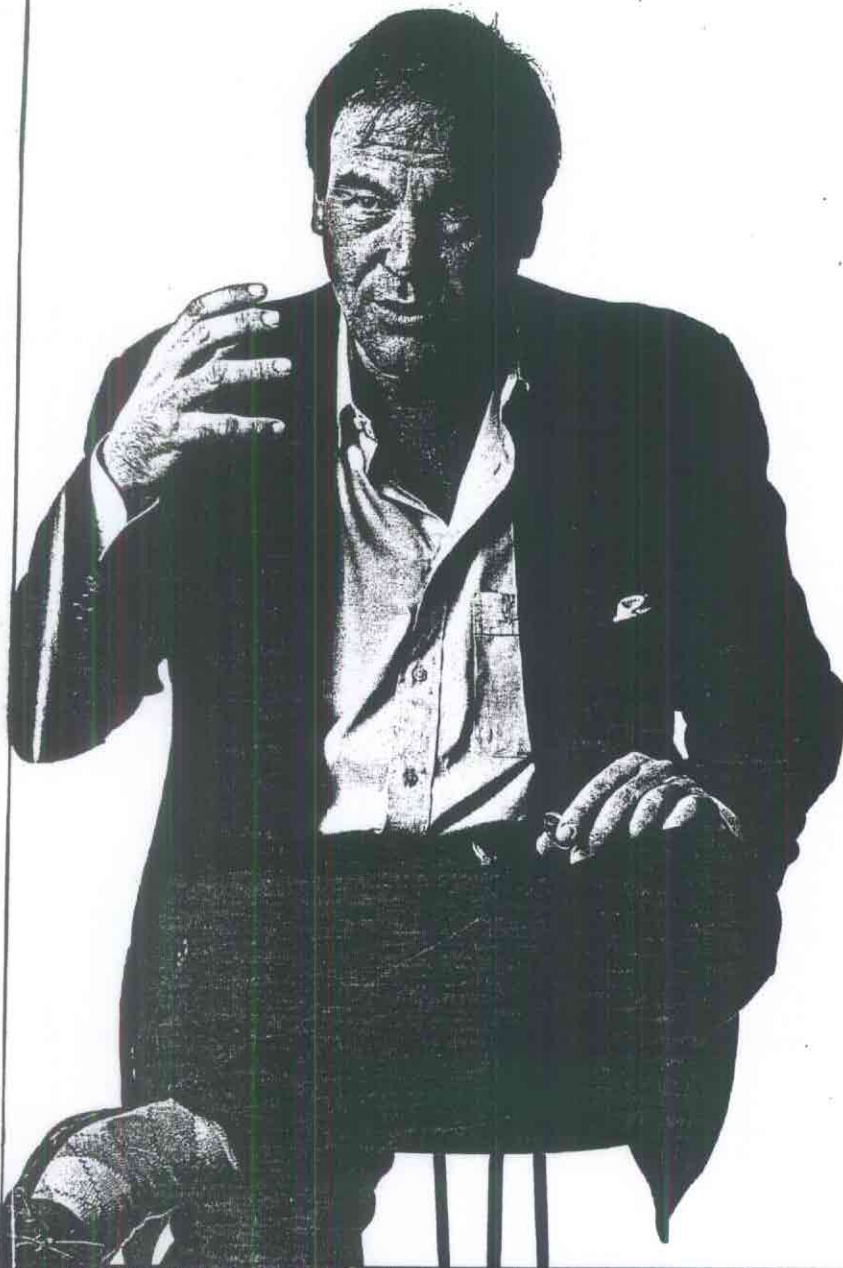
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Disenchanted by the war in Vietnam, the director aggressively questions governmental authority

only 12 years later. Garrison was the first one, I think, to get it out in a public forum with the trial in 1969. He subpoenaed Time-Life and succeeded in getting the film shown to a limited audience.

Q. What is the importance of the Zapruder film?

A. I think the most conclusive thing it shows is the fatal head shot coming from the front, from the fence. In addition, it shows the time frame of the shots, which makes it very difficult to believe Oswald fired three shots in 5.6 seconds. And of course it raises the whole question of how Connally and Kennedy were hit by the same bullet.

Q. From what you're saying, you would have 400 of the most notable media people in America knowing about a conspiracy to kill Kennedy.

A. I don't know that 400 people have to know anything. I think there is such a form of informational equilibrium that preserves the status quo that you can virtually call it silent consent.

Q. Why did you put famous actors—Jack Lemmon, Walter Matthau, Donald Sutherland, John Candy, Ed Asner—into small roles?

A. They help us along the road because the material might be in some sense dry and arcane to many people. Each actor has a little riddle or an obstacle for Garrison, who has to work his way around it to move farther into the heart of the labyrinth, where the Cretan Minotaur lives.

Q. Isn't Garrison's wife, the character played by Sissy Spacek, simplified in the film?

A. I didn't misinterpret his wife at all. That's the way she was. Garrison's investigation threatened her family life. They had five kids, and he was not home. We didn't practice politically correct feminism to try to make her into something she was not. What we did—you could fault me for it—was put a woman D.A. into his staff. He did not have a woman D.A.

The press in fact never did ask why Kennedy was killed. They immediately were, in a sense, trivialized by the questions of who and how. It all became a matter of scenery—Oswald, Ruby. Scenery distracts from the essential questions. Who benefited? Who had the power to cover it up? I don't point the finger of evil intention, but it is documented that the agency spent quite a bit of money to keep a leg up in journalism, that there were a lot of people working on their payroll.

Q. Specifically what evidence do you believe the press covered up?

A. Among other things, you have LIFE buying the Zapruder film and burying it and not showing it to the American public.* Eventually it was made available, but

* In fact, LIFE printed the most relevant still frames in its next issue. But at the request of Zapruder, who feared "exploitation" of the tragedy, it did not allow the film to be shown as a moving image. In 1975 LIFE sold the film back to the Zapruder family for \$1.

Q. Do you expect to see negative reaction to JFK?

A. I think older white males will have a major problem with it. I think the younger generation will be more open.

Q. The older generation has a memory of the event, the younger generation doesn't. What is your sense of responsibility to this younger, video generation, which will accept your movie as truth and history?

Cinema

A. We did a lot of homework. I had a dozen technical advisers going over the script with a fine-tooth comb. Everything that we have in there we stand behind. What is speculation is clearly speculation. We did not throw in any facts that we felt were wrong. I did make some composites. I've admitted that. I made it very clear [in interviews], for example, that Garrison never really met with the character called "X," played by Donald Sutherland, who explains the dimensions of the CIA conspiracy.

Q. You have drawn together many threads of conspiratorial theory in the film. Are you endorsing everything or simply advancing them as possibilities?

A. I think I pulled back in the movie from some of my own beliefs and probably softened some of my own conclusions for fear of seeming too aggressive and bullying about information.

Q. With this film, aren't you joining the ranks of the conspiracy industry and commercializing a national tragedy?

A. It's a cottage industry but not necessarily a very lucrative one. The movie faces commercial risk. It has to appeal on a large level to justify itself.

Q. From many of your films it seems you see America as an ugly, disturbed country populated with sinister characters.

A. *Talk Radio* is the darkest film I've made, but I don't personally feel that way about America. I have a lot more hope for America. I see it as a totally homogeneous land, and I love its vastness and its freedom. My mother is French. She was an immigrant who came over here in 1946. In a sense I'm half immigrant. I think that the best part of America is its lack of pretension and snobism. If anything, in my work I've tried to veer away from the élites that I think have corrupted and made cynical the American Dream. I hark back to an immigrant belief in the goodness of this country. I find it coming still from Asia, Mexico, Latin America, Europe. I think movies in a sense thrive on that democracy.

Q. Where were you on Nov. 22, 1963?

A. In my room during a lunch break at the Hill School in Pennsylvania. My reaction was very similar to Jim's in the movie. A fellow student ran into the room and said, "They just shot the President." It was



On location in Dallas, at the Texas School Book Depository

shocking to me because Kennedy was a handsome young man. I loved his rhetoric. Politically, I was against him because I was for Nixon and Goldwater. But in my heart I could not help being moved by his charisma. I was very sad for the family. We watched TV the whole weekend, just like in the movie. Then we moved on with our lives. We didn't really think about it. That was the point.

Q. When did you begin to develop an intuition that maybe it wasn't Oswald alone, that maybe there was a conspiracy?

A. I began to distrust the government through my Vietnam experience, when I started to see the degree of lying and corruption that was going on. When I came back from the war, I began to redefine the way I had grown up. I started writing screenplays more aggressively protesting the authority of this government. I wrote *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July*. I had heard the Oswald stories, but I had honestly been defeated by the size of the literature, and I didn't see its

implications in my life, as to how it affected the beginnings of the Vietnam War. And then Garrison's book was given to me. I read it and saw its implications as a thriller—a whydunit.

Q. You have been called a chronicler of the '60s and the last of the '60s radicals. What does the '60s mean to you?

A. First of all, I was never a radical in the '60s. I was, if anything, very straight. I went to school. I went to Vietnam. I was very slow in coming around. I do think the '60s is a determinant decade for the '90s, because people in my generation—I'm 45 now—are coming to power. We're the next power base of this country. We all grew up in the cold war. We were born in the dawn of the nuclear age. So the '60s is really determining what's going to happen in the '90s.

Q. You once said that Kennedy's assassination spawned the race riots, the hippie movement, organized protests and the drug culture. Do you think his death alone was responsible for this tide?

A. Yes, in a metaphorical sense. I think there was an erosion of trust in the government on the subconscious level. On the conscious level, we moved on. We buried Oswald and got rid of Ruby. The nightmare went away. But subconsciously the major fissure had occurred.

Historians in the 21st century are going to point to this as a key moment in American history.

Q. Quite apart from whether there was a small, limited conspiracy, isn't the movie saying that it was in the general interest of Lyndon Johnson that Kennedy be assassinated and the war in Vietnam go forward?

A. Kings are killed. It is the nature of political powers. I have no problem believing this. I can see where certain people do, and I can see where you might think I'm crazy. The film is a bit subversive in its approach. But a film can often be subversive to the subconscious. It comes out and it's often criticized and reviled, but it lasts. It's sort of like a tsunami wave. It starts out miles and miles from the beach. You hear a noise that just moves fast under the water. Then without warning it hits the beach, an explosion. Obviously, this film is going to be denied; there will be some decrying and reviling. All the errors are going to be attacked. It will be discredited. Yet it will survive. ■