

By Leonard W. Boasberg  
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

**O**liver Stone seems to be moonlighting as a press agent for Kennedy conspiracy books. A new batch has surged on the market since his controversial 1991 film, *JFK*, in which he imagined that the CIA, the FBI, the Secret Service, LBJ, the Dallas Police, right-wing Cubans, the giant multinational corporations and the Pentagon were involved in a massive conspiracy to kill President Kennedy and cover up their tracks.

Stone wrote a foreword to Robert J. Groden's *The Killing of a President: The Complete Photographic Record of the JFK Assassination, the Conspiracy, and the Cover-Up* (Viking, \$30), a coffee-table book containing gory shots of Kennedy's shattered head. He wrote a foreword to *JFK: The Last Dissenting Witness*, by Bill Sloan with Jean Hill (Pelican, Gretna, La., \$17.95). He wrote a dust-jacket blurb for Peter Dale Scott's *Deep Politics and the Death of JFK* (University of California Press, \$25).

The three books are among the couple of dozen that have been published in the last two years about the assassination of the 35th president of the United States 30 years ago today.

Add those to the 2,000 or so books published in the last

# A market for conspiracy

three decades, most of which say they disprove the conclusion of the blue-ribbon commission headed by Chief Justice Earl Warren.

President Lyndon Johnson appointed the seven-member commission a week after a bullet tore through Kennedy's head and the nation's heart. He did so to squelch widespread suspicions and rumors that there had been a plot, left-wing or right-wing, perhaps sponsored by

Castro Cuba or the Soviet Union, to kill JFK. He didn't succeed.

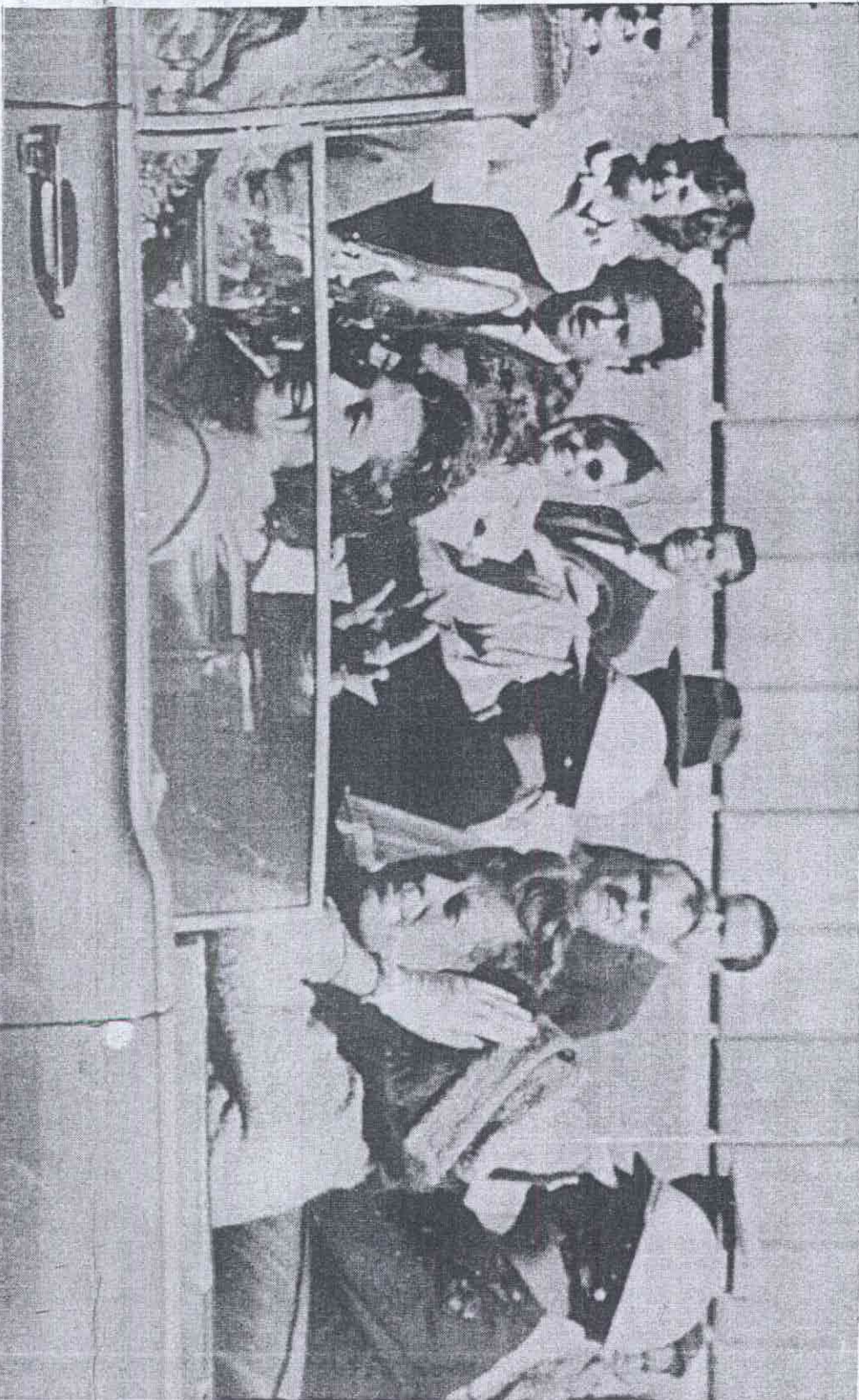
Although the commission declared that it "found no evidence" that either Lee Harvey Oswald, the accused assassin, or Jack Ruby, who killed Oswald two days after Kennedy's death, "was part of any conspiracy, domestic or foreign, to assassinate President Kennedy," the rumors

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*Writers are offering a new batch of theories about what happened 30 years ago today in Dallas. Many claim to offer proof that Kennedy's assassination was the work of more than one man. But no one answers the critical question: Who were the others?*



*President John F. Kennedy waving to the crowd in Dallas. A minute later came the fatal shot to his head.*

Associated Press

**THEORIES** from E1 and suspicions grew. They were fueled by assassination buffs such as Edward J. Epstein, Mark Lane and Jim Garrison, the New Orleans district attorney whose conspiracy case collapsed, but whom Oliver Stone made the hero of *JFK*, and a growing group of conspiracy theorists.

According to a CBS News poll broadcast a week ago, only 11 percent of the 1,117 adults surveyed believe that Oswald was the lone assassin, as the commission concluded. Nearly half believe the CIA was involved, and 81 percent believe an official coverup has kept Americans from knowing the truth.

Why this widespread belief, or disbelief?

"There always has been a touch of paranoia in the American psyche," says historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., a Kennedy adviser and author of *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*, one of the first JFK books published after the assassination. "There still are people arguing about the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. And also there are enough anomalies in the case. We now know that the CIA and the FBI withheld information from the Warren Commission, although I think they withheld that information as part of a bureaucratic self-protection rather than part of a coverup."

Conspiracy theories have a long history, here and abroad. At one time or another, people have conjured up conspiracies by the Bavarian Illuminati, the Freemasons, the Catholic Church, the Jews, the international bankers, the blacks, the whites and on and on, as the late historian Richard Hofstadter wrote in a famous essay, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." (Hofstadter first delivered the essay as a lecture a few days after Kennedy was killed, in the kind of coincidence that conspiracy theorists might find significant.)

Many Americans believed in Sen. Joe McCarthy, who attributed the decline in American strength after World War II to "a conspiracy on a scale so immense as to dwarf any previous such venture in the history of man." Thousands joined the John Birch Society, whose founder, Robert Welch, believed President Eisenhower to have been "a dedicated, conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy."

In the Kennedy case, observes historian Herbert Parment, author of two books on Kennedy, it just seems unacceptable that Lee Harvey Oswald, "this weakest of men, this man with a very troubled, disturbed background, could by himself have cut down the hero of Camelot. This seems possible only if sinister forces are at work."

Moreover, he points out, revela-



Associated Press

**A Dallas police detective examining Lee Harvey Oswald's rifle after the shooting. Many maintain there was another shooter.**

tions of official lies about Vietnam and of covert CIA operations that included overthrow of governments and assassination attempts, plus Watergate and most recently the Iran-contra affair, have made people even more receptive to the notion of a conspiracy. "When the public got a sense that the government was capable of acting in this underground, sub rosa manner, it became more plausible to suggest that certain sinister forces, even the government, were involved in the Kennedy assassination," Parment says.

That's the general theme of the conspiracy writers, many of whom say they present new evidence proving, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that there was a conspiracy to kill JFK. But whodunit?

"I am eventually always asked the

tensive footnotes and bibliography, plus several pages of photographs, plus lots of padding about Kennedy and his administration.

It does not solve the mystery, though. Nor does it have an introduction by Oliver Stone. That may be because, while the author agrees that "there was beyond any doubt a conspiracy," he considers Stone an extremist who "appears at times as nuts as the people he wants to expose." He even hints that Stone may be part of a coverup, with "the real evidence of forgery." By the way, Livingstone believes he's being watched. "All writers are policed in this country, even Ernest Hemingway," he writes.

In *The Last Investigation*, Gaetano Fonzi, a staff investigator for the House Select Committee on the Assassination in the late 1970s (and former senior editor for Philadelphia Magazine), connects Oswald to the CIA. In *JFK: The Last Dissenting Witness*, Jean Hill, who appears in the Zapruder film and (as played by Ellen McElduff) in *JFK*, recounts the grilling she got from the FBI when she stuck by her story that she had seen a second shooter on the grassy knoll at Dealey Plaza.

Theories, theories, and for a brief (and breezily written) examination of about three dozen of them, there's *Who Shot JFK? A Guide to the Major Conspiracy Theories* (Simon & Schuster, \$12 in paperback) by Bob Callahan. Sample chapter titles: "The Trial of Clay Shaw," "Murder Inc. in the Caribbean: The CIA-Mafia Alliance Controversy" and "Of Gods and Goddesses: The Judith Exner-Marilyn Monroe Controversy."

One other book deserves mention.

It's *Columbo: The Grassy Knoll* (Tom Doherty Associates, \$18.95) by William Harrington. In it, the rumpled TV detective, in order to investigate the murder of a controversial TV host, finds that he must solve the mystery of who really killed JFK. The book is, of course, fiction, but unlike so many others published on the subject, it calls itself fiction.

Is there a market for the wares of this cottage industry? Nothing like the viewing public for Stone's *JFK*, which has been seen by upward of 13 million people in the United States.

"They're not selling at the levels they've sold in the past," says Charles Winton, president and chief executive officer of Publishers Group West, the country's largest book marketing and distributing company. There is, he says, a core of about a quarter-million people who are "active consumers," but he also detects a jadedness among the general book-buying public.

Daisy Maryles, executive editor of *Publisher's Weekly*, agrees. "I think people are being sated by the many articles and features that are going to run in conjunction with the 30th anniversary."

Posner's *Case Closed*, though, is doing fairly well. It appeared for five weeks on the New York Times best-seller list and has gone into five printings totaling 135,000 copies.

In Philadelphia, Borders Book Shop at 18th and Walnut Streets has been selling only one or two conspiracy books a month, but sold 27 copies in the 10 weeks following publication of *Case Closed*, according to publicist Brendan Helmuth.

But, he added: "The straight Kennedy biographies are doing better"; Richard Reeves' *President Kennedy: Profile of Power* (Simon & Schuster, \$30) was published Oct. 21, and the store has already sold 35 copies.