

OPINIONS

JFK through the looking-glass

by Gaeton Fonzi

Don't get suckered now. Just because Oliver Stone's "JFK" has sparked a controversy about opening the government's historic secret files on the Kennedy assassination, don't start thinking that the movie itself has anything to do with history.

Thank God we got an early warning about that. It didn't take the mass media long to inform us that "JFK" has nothing to do with historic reality. We were warned about it even before Stone finished the film. The Washington Post cautioned that his script was full of "errors and absurdities." Later, Time notified us that the movie would "distort history." Newsweek posted its warning in a big black headline: "Twisted History." The New York Times' Tom Wicker cried out an alert about Stone "rewriting history."

But what the hell is history?

Is history what the media reported to us when the Warren Commission Report was released and told us that the commission's investigation was exhaustive and comprehensive?

Or is history the fact that the commission's investigation was largely based on FBI reports gathered in three weeks, reports which were consistently loose-ended, incomplete and devoid of follow up — often, it appeared, deliberately so?

Is history what the media told us about the validity of the Warren Commission's conclusions, endorsing them with immediate and rapturous editorials?

Or is history those 26 volumes of evidence the commission did not release until months after it issued its conclusions, volumes which contain evidence outlandishly at odds with its findings?

Is history the media's portrait of Lee Harvey Oswald as provided by the Warren Commission, a strained caricature of a deranged, lone assassin with leftist political loyalties?

Or is history the Oswald who was given secret espionage missions while in the U.S. after a "defection" to Russia without

ever being questioned by the CIA, and who posed as a pro-Castro pamphleteer in New Orleans but had contacts only with anti-Castro Cuban exiles supported by the CIA?

Is history limited to what the mass media chooses to tell us, a selection of facts tainted by its biases and limited by its negligence in fulfilling its Fourth Estate watchdog role?

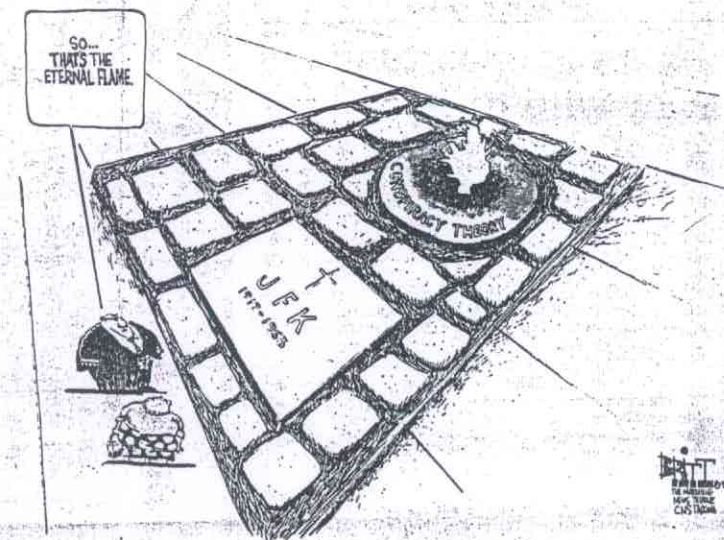
Of course not. And neither is history only what the government chooses to tell us. Keep that in mind now in the current debate about whether or not the secret Kennedy assassination files should be made public. Those files were generated in the course of two official investigations into the President's assassination, first by the Warren Commission and then by the House Select Committee on Assassinations. I reviewed most of the Warren Commission's files and, as a staff investigator and team leader on the House Select Committee, I worked with or generated many of the files now sequestered in the government's archives.

To what extent do those files contain the reality about the Kennedy assassination?

I recall an incident that vividly defines that question.

It was more than a year into the two-year life of the Select Committee on Assassinations. Too much of that time had been spent fighting for funding and the committee's political survival, very little into conducting an organized investigation into Kennedy's assassination. The first chief counsel, Richard Sprague, a highly successful criminal prosecutor from Philadelphia, had been forced out.

Sprague himself believed it



was for two reasons: First, he had demanded time and funding for a no-holds-barred, open-ended probe that would endure until an answer was found. (He had the novel idea of approaching the assassination as if it were a murder case.) Second, and more important, he refused to accept any restrictions governing access to the CIA's files. Sprague had not had any previous experience working in Washington. To replace him, the committee found a chief counsel who knew how to play the political game.

G. Robert Blakey, an organized-crime expert from Cornell Law, had served on a number of congressional committees and knew what the politicians expected of him. At his first staff meeting, he set the priorities: To finish a written report within the deadline and to remain within our budgetary bounds.

Nevertheless, time began to run out. Blakey's chief deputy, a stirrup-high, boot-clomping Texan named Gary Cornwell, called a staff meeting. He announced

that from now on, the nature of our investigation, restricted as it had been, would have to be additionally limited. We could pursue only what Cornwell called "linchpin issues." We had only so much time and money remaining. Cornwell warned, so we would have to restrict our investigation to those areas where we knew we could find answers. We must remember, Cornwell said, that Congress gave us a job to do and dictated the time and resources in which to do it.

I remember sitting slouched on one of those big red-leather bureaucratic sofas, scribbling some notes and waiting for what he had just said to sink in. Then suddenly I piped up: "Realistically, that doesn't make any sense!" I almost yelled, as if it had just dawned on me.

"C'mon, Gary, I'm serious," I said. "Are you telling us that we won't be able to pursue any questions in this case, regardless of how important we think they are, unless we know we can thoroughly investigate them in a

few months?"

Not the real world

"I am serious," said Cornwell. "And I'm not being flip when I say reality is irrelevant here. I told you, this is not the real world we're dealing with, this is the legislative world. We have to live with it."

And we still do. The Select Committee on Assassinations was mandated by Congress to "conduct a full and complete investigation." It did nothing of the sort.

Yet now we're supposed to believe that it's Oliver Stone's movie that distorts history.

Gaeton Fonzi is a veteran journalist who spent three years as a U.S. Government investigator looking into President Kennedy's assassination.