

THIRTY YEARS ON, the Kennedy assassination is still the lodestar of modern American political consciousness, the moment at which our postwar Eden started to unravel.

The Kennedy assassination was also the moment at which the visual media became the shaping force in our political experience. TV drove the iconic moments of the tragedy — Johnson taking the oath, Oswald taking the bullet — into popular consciousness.

Hollywood, noticeably reticent, offered only one film dealing directly with the assassination through the 1980s, David Miller's *Executive Action* (1973), although William Richert's *Winter Kills* (1979), based on Richard Condon's novel, presented a broadly fictionalized paraphrase. In both films, the assassination is the work of right-wing interests threatened by a liberal administration; in *Winter Kills*, the hit is ordered by the Joe Kennedy-style clan patriarch himself. The message of *Winter Kills* particularly was that the Kennedy assassination was an epiphenomenon of deep politics — a minor perturbation in a system inaccessible to democratic controls and depraved at the core. Such cynicism wasn't without appeal in the '70s, and it dovetailed neatly with a spate of revisionist historiography that emphasized the seamier sides of Camelot. In a climate of universal corruption, who could be surprised if the serpent ate his own tail?

Oliver Stone's muckraking *JFK* (1991) accepted the underlying premise of *Winter Kills* while rejecting its conclusion. It single-handedly reinstated the Kennedy assassination as a contemporary political issue, prompting the release of



SHILLING FOR THE WARREN REPORT

The differing conceptions of JFK and In the Line of Fire may ultimately matter more than whether we'll ever know who killed Kennedy.

BY ROBERT ZALLER

data withheld from the public for a generation as well as responses ranging from congressional debate to a symposium in the *American Historical Review*. Stone deliberately proposed that all the prime assassin suspects of conspiracy advocates — Cuban exiles, the Mafia, the CIA, the FBI — had been implicated in some larger, overarching plot. If *Winter Kills* ultimately encouraged citizen passivity by suggesting that the Kennedys might have killed their own at the behest of the Establishment, *JFK* fostered populist paranoia by arguing that the Kennedys alone might have been innocent.

Now comes *In the Line of Fire*, the anodyne response of the media establishment to Stone's rabble-rouser. Directed by Wolfgang Petersen but clearly a Clint Eastwood vehicle, it takes a cleverly indirect tack, concealing its political message in the clichés of a standard action thriller. Eastwood plays Frank Horrigan, an aging Secret Service agent who becomes the point man in an attempt to foil a latter-day Presidential assassination. The tie-in with Kennedy is that Horrigan is the last of the Secret Service detail that rode behind the President in Dallas, and failed to cover him as the shots rang out. Horrigan's career has been shadowed by this event, and his personal life haunted by it. When a new would-be assassin challenges him to foil the assassin's plan to kill the sitting President, the stakes are immense for Horrigan (and by extension for us as his empathetic audience): to achieve symbolic redemption, or face a terminal definition of his guilt.

Horrigan's antagonist has not chosen him lightly. Mitch Leary (John Malkovich) is a rogue CIA operative who has

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been jettisoned by the agency with the end of the Cold War — the end, that is, of the conflict whose high drama JFK had personified more than any other postwar political figure. Mitch thus seeks his own justification from the only person who can assure him that it all somehow mattered — the opposite number whom he sees as a brother in betrayal.

Of course Kennedy can't be killed again, and the stand-in quarry — a Presidential nonentity so vapid that (like the kidnapped mayor rescued in *The Enforcer* [1976] by Eastwood's Dirty Harry) he doesn't even rate a name — is only the nominal target. The real question is whether Frank will stand up for the bullet that he failed to take in 1963. The fact that there is nothing at stake in the present — no ideology to vindicate, no hero to protect — makes the gambit all the more obvious symbolically, and the chase all the more abstractly compelling. If *In the Line of Fire* can't restore JFK again, it offers us instead the innocence of the moment before he was shot, before we assumed our national guilt and mourning.

The game is rigged, not only because Eastwood never plays a loser (however equivocal his victories may be) but because Mitch must fail in order to succeed: To assassinate his cardboard victim would produce only revenge against the bureaucracy that has cast him aside, not justification for a life spent doing freedom's dirty work, and for Frank Horrigan to prove conclusively a coward would spoil even the pleasure of that.

By assuming the role of Oswald, Mitch steers us away from the free-form, guilt-reinforcing conspiracy world of Stone's *JFK* toward the safe haven of the Warren Report. To return to the moment before Dallas depends on our being able to foil the assassin, which depends in turn on positing a lone gunman who can be found and stopped before he strikes. This is the wish-fulfilling premise of *In the*

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Line of Fire, a wish that the global conspiracy theory of JFK expressly denies. It is not only that such a conspiracy would be virtually impossible to forestall, but that its very existence would negate the fantasy of a prelapsarian American innocence, embodied in an ideal leader, that a single bullet destroyed. Thus the myth of innocence and the nostalgic cult of the leader that fed on it can be sustained only as long as we can believe that a lone assassin acted at Dallas. The actual identity of the assassin is secondary, just as the linchpin of the Warren Report was not the proof of Oswald's guilt but the single-bullet theory that makes it plausible. As Frank Horrigan puts it — dismissing the politics of the assassination entirely — he doesn't care *who* fired the fatal shot in Dallas; he only knows he should have stopped it.

The fact that Mitch turns out to be a former CIA operative (as Oswald was) would seem to recomplicate matters, particularly when Frank learns that the CIA has concealed its knowledge of Mitch from the FBI. But the agency is let off the hook when we learn that it has terminated his employment. Mitch is no longer working for anyone but himself, and it is his bitterness at the agency for disavowing him that provokes him to act. At bottom he is a true believer in a way that Frank, who lives not by an ideal but by a code, is not. The message is clear: Mitch/Oswald wants to kill the President, the CIA does not (although it will do nothing to prevent it at the cost of exposing its connection to Mitch). By extension, the CIA is innocent of the Kennedy assassination, despite its links to Oswald and its attempts to cover them up. Here is the Warren Report redivivus, garnished with just enough cynicism to make it palatable to a skeptical contemporary public.

JFK was a blunderbuss fired at a wall of official truth in the hope of provoking fresh inquiry into the most traumatic event of our times. *In the Line of Fire* is a fantasy based on the assumption that what the public wants is not truth but exculpation. What is at stake in these differing conceptions of our civic culture is in the last analysis a good deal more important than whether we know now or ever will know who killed Kennedy. ■

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