

A conspiracy grew in Tinseltown

By William H. Manchester

In the closing minutes of Oliver Stone's \$40 million film about the slaying of President John F. Kennedy, audiences are told that "a congressional investigation from 1976-1979 found a 'probable conspiracy' in the assassination of President Kennedy and recommended the Justice Department investigate further."

That is true in the sense that it would be true to write that the Titanic sailed from England on smooth seas, leaving the rest of the voyage unmentioned. On the wide screen, Stone then adds: "As of 1991, the Justice Department has done nothing."

That is not true in any sense. Stone knows that, but clearly the American people do not. Last year — the first year after the release of Stone's movie — a New York Times/CBS poll found that 77 percent of those questioned believe that Kennedy was the victim of a conspiracy. It is time they, too, knew.

Stone has repeatedly denounced "the media," "the Eastern establishment press" and "the New York Times and its allies" for failing to find proof of a plot to murder Kennedy. Actually the responsible press has, for the most part, covered this difficult story with skill and good judgment.

And although few know of it, 10 years ago newspapers published incontrovertible evidence that the congressional findings Stone quotes, and which are essential to his credibility, are based on quicksand. How and why they have remained invisible is a tale in itself.

The investigation Stone cites was conducted by a House select committee chaired by Democratic Rep. Louis Stokes of Ohio. More than 20 books had been published challeng-

ing the Warren Commission's 1964 finding, that Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, murdered the president. The 95th Congress wanted to settle the issue.

Investigators for the Stokes committee asked me to open my files. I agreed, and on Feb. 18, 1978, two staff members flew from Washington to copy documents. As they left, they said they expected the committee to endorse the Warren report. They hoped to break fresh ground but doubted it could be done.

It hadn't been done 10 months later when the 12 members of the Stokes committee began reviewing a 600-page draft of their final report. They had spent nearly \$6 million and accumulated enough material to fill 12 bound volumes, yet all it amounted to was a confirmation of Warren. They planned to adopt a weak compromise, reporting that rumors of a plot could be neither proved nor eliminated.

But they hadn't given up. Since the Kent State tragedy, acoustics had become a familiar branch of forensic science, and they had engaged the services of Bolt, Beranek and Newman Inc., a Cambridge, Mass., firm specializing in acoustical analysis.

However, the four-man team Bolt, Beranek sent to Dallas found a depressing lack of data. On Nov. 22, 1963, Dallas police dispatchers had communicated with officers in the field over two channels. The transmissions on Channel I, which was used for routine police radio traffic, were recorded on a Dictaphone bell recorder; those on Channel II, which had been reserved for the presidential motorcade, were taped on a Gray Audograph disk.

The quality of both was poor. The president had been killed while his motorcade was taking a detour around Dealey Plaza, so the team concentrated on that part of the transmissions. But all the recordings seemed to offer was a cacophony of motorcycle engines,

radio on-and-off clicks, scratches on the tapes, whistles, sirens and slurred speech. There was even the sound of a carillon bell, which was weird; there were no carillons near the plaza. One forensic specialist compared the tapes to badly smudged fingerprints.

Furthermore, all transmissions were sound-activated, which at first made the analytic task seem impossible. Then the investigative team discovered that the microphone switch on one police vehicle being monitored over Channel 1 — a motorcycle or a cruiser — had become stuck open at 12:28 p.m. that Friday. It remained jammed for 5½ minutes. That was the crucial period; the president had been slain at 12:30 p.m.

On Aug. 20, 1978, the Bolt, Beranek team had placed 36 microphones 18 feet apart in the plaza and recorded 12 test shots, first from Oswald's nest on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository and then from the area's so-called grassy knoll. After studying the impulse patterns on the Channel 1 Dictabelt, they tentatively identified four recorded sounds as gunfire. If they were correct, shots one, two and four had been fired by Oswald; No. 3 had come from the knoll.

Spirits briefly rose on the Stokes committee, then fell when the experts, testifying on Sept.

11, stressed that there was only a 29 percent chance that the impulse patterns on the tape were shots. And even if that hurdle were cleared, the chances that the third shot had come from the knoll were just 50 percent.

Six weeks later, the committee beefed up its acoustical staff by bringing in two new analysts, Mark Weiss and Ernest Aschkenasy, professors of computer science at Queens College, City University of New York. They were asked to conduct an analytical extension of the Bolt, Beranek work.

The analysts from Bolt, Beranek joined Weiss and Aschkenasy in declaring that the probability that a gunman fired at the president from the grassy knoll was 95 percent.

Their testimony, in open session on Dec. 29, 1978, made front pages across the country. Although they were careful to point out that it was Oswald who had killed the president — that the gunman on the grassy knoll had missed — the presence of a second sniper seemed clear evidence of a conspiracy. Stokes, supported by a majority of his committee, blamed organized crime.

Scrapping its earlier draft, the committee approved a seven-page "Summary of Findings and Recommendations," quoting its

acoustical scientists as having established "a high probability that two gunmen fired at President John F. Kennedy." And that, according to Oliver Stone, was that.

Except that it wasn't. It was only the end of the first act. The second, final act introduced an entirely new cast — Americans eminent in the physical sciences.

The Department of Justice had been wondering about the competence of the select committee's acoustical analysts. Their inference contradicted all other Dallas evidence, both eyewitness and circumstantial.

The FBI had its own experts in ballistics, forensic acoustics and electronic examinations of tape recordings. They had been astounded by the Weiss-Aschkenasy methodology, an analysis that had begun with a conclusion and then searched for evidence to support it. Special agent Bruce Koenig had quietly begun an independent investigation, but because the bureau was no longer thought to be above politics, any unsupported study bearing its imprimatur would be suspect.

The Justice Department's response to the Stokes committee's challenge was slow to

take shape, but in the end it was the right one. The Stokes committee filed its final report on June 2, 1979. Seven months later, on Jan. 5, 1980, a department spokesman announced that the National Science Foundation had been asked to make "a limited inquiry" focusing "primarily on the controversial acoustical evidence that a second person fired at Kennedy in Dallas's Dealey Plaza on Nov. 22, 1963."

The Washington press hardly noticed it. Perhaps the endless inquiries into the Dallas tragedy had become tiresome. Nevertheless, something big was in the works. That fall the National Research Council, responding to the Justice Department's appeal, created a Committee on Ballistic Acoustics. The chairman was Norman Ramsey, a physics professor at Harvard and a future Nobel laureate. Joining him were scientists from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Princeton, Bell Laboratories, Columbia, IBM, the Xerox Palo Alto (Calif.) Research Center and, from the University of California at Berkeley, Luis Alvarez, another Nobel laureate.

In studying the tapes, members of the Ramsey committee traced echo patterns, employed digitalized short-term acoustic spectrums, calculated the frequency ratios of the two police channels, cross-correlated coefficients between them and, after 18 months of research, filed a 96-page report. It seethed with professional outrage.

Their judgment on their predecessors from Cambridge and Queens was pitiless. Both, they found, had been guilty of a cardinal

scientific sin: the omission of control tests and subjective selection of data. They had also committed grave errors of statistical analysis. Moreover — this finding was unanimous — nothing resembling the sound of gunfire had been recorded on either channel.

The sounds the select committee experts had identified as gunshots were actually "electrical impulses produced internally by the Dallas police department's radio system" — in a word, static. There was no evidence of any noise whatever from the grassy knoll. And all this had been independently confirmed by Koenig's FBI technicians.

Every deduction drawn by Bolt, Beranek and Weiss-Aschkenasy had assumed that the officer with the open microphone had been in the motorcade. But he wasn't. Actually, he couldn't have been — the mike had picked up neither the sound of cheering before the shots were fired nor the sirens afterward. He and his motorcycle had been stationed at a police command post near the Dallas Trade Mart, awaiting instructions over Channel 1.

Coverage of the Ramsey committee's findings was not journalism's finest hour. The committee's report was delivered to the attorney general on May 14, 1982. The working press covered it with its usual professional skill, but editors, not reporters, decide how an article is played. Charges that the president had been the victim of a conspiracy had been Page 1 news, but proof that those charges were false was not. The humbled analysts from Bolt, Beranek and Queens College wisely declined to challenge the report.

The Washington Post put the story on Page 3;

Although few know of it, 10 years ago newspapers published incontrovertible evidence that the congressional findings Oliver Stone quotes, and which are essential to his credibility, are based on quicksand. How and why they have remained invisible is a tale in itself, told by William Manchester, author of "The Death of a President," as the 30-year anniversary of Kennedy's assassination approaches.

Three decades of debate

Nov. 22, 1963 — President Kennedy is assassinated in Dallas.

1964 — The Warren Commission finds that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in murdering the president.



William Manchester

1967 — William Manchester's "The Death of a President" is published. His book had been sanctioned by the Kennedys, but the family withdrew its approval before publication and sued, apparently over some of the political content. The suit was settled out of court and the book was published to much praise and profit, but it also faced criticism that Manchester was too partisan to the Kennedy legend.

June 2, 1979 — After a two-year investigation, the House Select Committee on Assassinations (the Stokes committee) files its final report, quoting acoustical analysts in finding "a high probability that two gunmen fired at President John F. Kennedy."

May 14, 1982 — The Ramsey committee, a group of scientists who found gaping holes in the acoustical research used by the Stokes committee, delivers its report to the U.S. attorney general. Its conclusions do not make front-page news — unlike the prominence given to the charges that the president had been the victim of a conspiracy.

December 1991 — Oliver Stone's movie "JFK" is released, alleging a far-reaching plot and a high-level coverup of it.

1992 — A New York Times/CBS poll finds that 77 percent of those questioned believe that Kennedy was the victim of a conspiracy.



Oliver Stone

THE REAL THING



Associated Press

THE MOVIE



most newspapers did not mention it. The New York Times carried it on Page 35 under a ho-hum "New Study" headline.

The Ramsey report should have reached a vast audience but didn't. Nevertheless, Oliver Stone knew of it. Ramsey wrote him three years ago, pointing out Stone's error in telling moviegoers that "nothing has been done" since the select committee filed its report. He is still waiting for a reply.

The National Research Council, a branch of the National Academy of Sciences, distributed copies of the Ramsey committee's report to a few scientists. Because it is unpublished, it has no International Series Book Number. But anyone who has studied it (and the independent FBI report, which confirms it) knows that the acoustical expertise cited by Stokes' select committee is worthless. Thus there is no evidence of a second gunman, which means that the only conspirator in Oliver Stone's film is glib, shallow, completely irresponsible Oliver Stone himself.

William Manchester is a writer in residence and professor emeritus at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Conn. He wrote this article for the Hartford Courant.