



AMERICAN HISTORICAL REVIEW

APRIL 1992

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# The American Historical Review

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*not relevant*

MARCUS RASKIN

THE FILM *JFK*, BY OLIVER STONE and his colleagues, has had an extraordinary effect on the public consciousness. In a few months' time, the film has generated concrete political actions that never would have occurred had the film not been made or had it not struck the chord of reevaluation that comes at the end of a war/Cold War period. *JFK* seems destined to lead to the opening of the hundreds of thousands of papers collected by the House Select Committee on Assassinations and the Warren Commission but now under seal. (Perhaps this time, the government will even index the papers and hearings, something that neither the House Committee nor the Warren Commission did.) The reason for the film's effect is that it is powerful cinematically. Contrary to what some would like to believe, it is surprisingly accurate. On the complex question of the Kennedy assassination itself, the film holds its own against the Warren Commission. The speculations that various characters spout are too broad brush. Even so, the seeds of further inquiry are planted.

As a work of art, *JFK* succeeds because it confronts powerful emotions and political truths that are as age-old as Homer and Sophocles. It does no good to pick apart the rendering of an event by an artist. His or her purpose is not the particular but the general. It is to take an event and see within it a series of truths, some felt, some unconsciously understood and hardly articulated, that make sense and meaning of an event, its cause, and its implications. Indeed, artists-dramatists dare to present through a book, drama, painting, or film the structure and moral character of an entire age, which necessarily includes its agonies and foibles. Some of these explanations are tendentious, silly, paranoid, vengeful, scapegoat-oriented, and sheer lies. But *JFK* cannot be dismissed this way, for it is not a lie. It is a myth of heroic dramatic proportions that "is true precisely because it has happened so many times that it must be retold again and again to explore the dimensions and varieties of its truth."<sup>1</sup>

The Report of the Warren Commission had a different purpose. It was ostensibly concerned with facts, although that concern was secondary to using the language and structure of conservative authority to move the nation from dis-ease to ease about the events of the Kennedy assassination. Stone's *JFK* has a filmic political objective in the literary genre of Theodore Dreiser: to be disruptive

<sup>1</sup> Richard McKeon on Thomas Mann, *Thought, Action, and Passion* (Chicago, 1954), 226.

ostensibly for the purpose of getting at the truth of the American government. Still in literary terms, the Warren Commission's political purpose was closer to that of Herman Wouk's establishmentarian novels. The commission's final report was intended to soothe those who had doubts. This connection is noted by Kai Bird in *The Chairman*, his new book on John J. McCloy, the distinguished establishmentarian who was a member of the Warren Commission. McCloy stated that the commission had to be unanimous even though three of the members who held elective office, Richard Russell, Hale Boggs, and John Sherman Cooper, had grave doubts about the single bullet theory and the notion that there was no conspiracy. These doubts were also pointed out by Edward Jay Epstein in his early book on the Kennedy assassination, *Inquest*. McCloy believed that it was time to assuage the nation, let the dust settle over the dastardly events and move forward. Thus he wrote language, carefully crafted indeed, that would allow healing and soothing to work itself into the body politic, and would rally all members of the commission to sign on, their doubts notwithstanding.<sup>2</sup> It is not difficult to understand why the commission sought to quiet people's questions, however misplaced its intentions seem today.

The assassination occurred approximately one year after the Cuban missile crisis, a period in which people had been treated to the strong possibility of nuclear war. It seemed a continuing imminent threat. Kennedy's assassination added greatly to fears of instability and world crisis, and doubts about the character of American governance spread immediately to Europe. As Harrison Salisbury of the *New York Times* stated in his introduction to an edition of the Warren Commission report to which he, Anthony Lewis, Tom Wicker, and James Reston (all of the *Times*) contributed, "Not infrequently (such) groups (the 'Who Killed Kennedy committee' which included Bertrand Russell, Lord Boyd-Orr, Sir Compton Mackenzie, J. B. Priestley, Professor Hugh Trevor-Roper, Kingsley Martin and Michael Foot) . . . compare the Kennedy killing to the Dreyfus affair—the inference being that the whole weight of authority of the American Establishment—Government, Big Business, the Power Structure of Society—has been placed behind a campaign to rest the blame on a single (presumably innocent) man."<sup>3</sup>

FOR AN ENTIRE GENERATION, the scar over the healing process of forgetfulness about the Kennedy assassination hid a festering sore of doubt. This sore on the body politic spread as a result of the Indochina war, secret wars from Angola to Cambodia, assassination plots the United States participated in or initiated, the CIA's involvement in the sale and growth of heroin and opium as well as its experimentation with LSD on unwitting subjects, the use of covert agents and assets to intervene directly in the American political process, FBI illegal wiretaps and black-bag jobs, bribes to foreign leaders, and harrassment of black minorities.

<sup>2</sup> Kai Bird, *The Chairman* (New York, 1992); Edward Jay Epstein, *Inquest: The Warren Commission and the Establishment of Truth*, Richard H. Rovere, intro. (New York, 1966).

<sup>3</sup> United States Warren Commission, *Report of the Warren Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy*, Harrison E. Salisbury, intro. (New York, 1964), xxv.

Many of these governmental activities were hidden behind the veil of secrecy and loyalty oaths, which warded off independent scholars, politicians, or mere citizens from looking too carefully at how the national security state actually operated. National security leaders used half-truths, lies, and plausible deniability in order to mask the real state of affairs. And then there were the doubts raised by the Warren Commission itself.

The proofs the commission offered grew more dubious with the passage of time. There was a single bullet that supposedly passed through Kennedy and Governor John Connally. Discovered on Connally's stretcher at Parkland Hospital, it was virtually pristine, an incredible possibility given what it had struck. The commission relied on the FBI and CIA. It had no way of independently verifying what these agencies told it. What has come to be known about these agencies since that time has only increased doubts about the commission's findings, which seemed designed to protect covert activities such as gun running to Cuba and CIA involvement with gangsters.

Nor did the commission follow what is called the best evidence rule in reconstructing the assassination. To do so, it would have had to replicate as closely as possible the conditions of that day to see whether another marksman could have successfully hit a moving target in the position the president was seated. The FBI made clear that they tested a rifle that did not replicate the one fired under the conditions of November 22.<sup>4</sup> Thus, as I have argued elsewhere, "The Commission now credits Oswald with doing extraordinary things without showing that one man could do them."<sup>5</sup> The president's commission should have reconstructed the events by having an ex-marine of Lee Harvey Oswald's approximate background, physical size, and marksman ability see whether he could re-create Oswald's alleged feat of marksmanship. The commission might then have asked the ex-marine to perform within a 43-minute period Oswald's supposed subsequent activities. Between 12:33 and 1:16 p.m., Oswald is alleged to have shot the president and Governor Connally, left the School Book Depository (from the sixth floor), taken a "7 block walk on Elm Street, a bus ride toward the area he had just left, another walk to his rooming house where he spent 3 or 4 minutes, a pause at a bus stop for an unspecified length of time, a walk almost a mile long to the intersection at East 10th Street and Patton Avenue, and at last, the confrontation and murder of Officer Tippit."<sup>6</sup> If the best evidence rule was not followed, neither was anything like the falsifiability program for testing scientific hypotheses used to prove Oswald the lone assassin.

A generation grown to maturity in the 1960s later took it for granted that governments would and did lie. In the Cold War period, it did not take a feverish mind or great logicians such as Bertrand Russell to conclude that there was something rotten in the United States. But this conclusion did not come easy. Generations of journalists and academics had been educated in institutions of higher learning to the Platonic idea of golden lies, which guardians of the state

<sup>4</sup> Testimony by FBI agent Lyndal L. Shaneyfelt, Warren Commission Hearings, vol. 5, 146.

<sup>5</sup> Marcus Raskin, *Yale Law Journal*, 76 (1967): 567.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Lane, *Rush to Judgment: A Critique of the Warren Commission's Inquiry into the Murders of President John F. Kennedy, Officer J. D. Tippit, and Lee Harvey Oswald*, Hugh Trevor-Roper, intro. (New York, 1966), quoted in Marcus Raskin, review, *Yale Law Journal*, 76 (1967): 568.

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had an obligation to tell the lesser classes. The public was to be "educated" with "sanitized" stories about reality; it was a beast to be manipulated. From J. B. Watson to Walter Lippmann to Harold Lasswell, advertising, symbol manipulation, and propaganda were assumed to be necessary attributes to governing and consuming in a mass society. Organization men and experts were socialized to interpret the world to laymen according to a preexisting framework that denied the possibility of a "free gaze" regarding evidence. The Warren Commission's bright young staff of lawyers were no match for its putative investigative arms, the CIA and FBI. Indeed, the idea of deeply questioning these organizations did not cross their intellectual radar screen, nor could they do so as long as Allen Dulles, the former head of the CIA, was on the commission. He had been fired by President Kennedy for the Bay of Pigs fiasco. In the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs, Howard Hunt became an adviser to Dulles for the purpose of defending Dulles and CIA covert operators against the New Frontiersmen, especially Robert Kennedy and Maxwell Taylor, charged by the president with assuring that such a failure would never occur again. *not to investigate all?*

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The war in Indochina shattered the secret establishmentarian/conventionalist way of doing business. Those directly victimized by that conflict began wondering about the character of the American government. Some came to believe that if John Kennedy had lived and had won a second term, the politics of America would have been much different and the nation would not have passed through the Indochina agony. Thus JFK seems to be the revenge of Oliver Stone's generation. In Freudian terms, for Stone President Kennedy is transformed into an imago who would have warded off the evil and difficulties his generation and others passed through. Stone uses his imago, Kennedy, and his dramatic instrument, Garrison, to speak to the next generation, one that knows little American history. It receives its moral, political, and historical understanding about the past through images. Thus JFK is potential dynamite—a 40 million-dollar Hollywood version of a samizdat—for it has shaken a carefully constructed *Weltanschauung* that sought to teach the lesson that accidents and random events are more important in the processes of social, economic, and political life than structures and organization. JFK is meant to use the assassination to force an audience to decide whether it wants to ground the American political process in the post-Cold War era with the same structures and habits of mind that governed it during the Cold War. Should, for example, we continue to have secrecy in government obscuring our understanding through the opaque shield of state security?

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SECRETS, OF COURSE, GIVE RISE TO PARANOIA, for they leave people feeling incomplete and used. To fatalists, the world may be nothing more than a series of random events and accidents, but most people crave a coherent explanation of why the events that shape their destiny occur. Indeed, this is a psychological function of history. Without this grounding, a person feels uneasy and unable to shape at least part of his or her destiny. Historians attempt to trace causes, people,

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and events that come together. And so it is with political matters. It is true that many events in a person's life, as well as great historical events, appear to be accidental or random; they seem to have no explanation. Nevertheless, if one looks closely, rejecting the culture of violence and secrecy, an explanation and a cause may be found.

There is nothing random about an assassination nor is there much that is random about a state murder. It takes planning, steely nerves, killing ability, and a motive. It will almost always involve more than one person. Those who think that groups of people do not get together to bring about a particular result are surely out of touch with reality. People, and especially governments, act with will and intention. That their means may be illegal, even criminal, or that they may fail in their objective, does not change the irreducible fact that government officials get together to bring about a particular result. Indeed, this is what a conspiracy is when a criminal purpose is added to the definition. *over dit*

Conspiracy is an activity that can be carried on by governments or by members within governments who are on a frolic or who are rogues. And, as numerous prosecutions by the state have shown, conspiracies are also carried out by some citizens. It is absurd to argue that conspiracies do not exist or that will and intention have given way to Gidean gratuitous acts that have no intention or explanation by the performer of the deed, the victim, or others examining the act. Thus it is far better and more accurate to begin from the assumption that conspiracies are common, especially in politics. As I have suggested, their objectives are criminal or illegal in either execution and result or both. This is why the Report of the Warren Commission, like most government documents, should be read from the recommendations through to the body, for, in the conclusions, the reader may begin to assess what is really bothering the writers: "The Commission believes that both the FBI and the Secret Service have too narrowly construed their respective responsibilities. The Commission has the impression that too much emphasis is placed by both on the investigation of specific threats by individuals and not enough on dangers from other sources."<sup>7</sup>

During the Cold War, governmental conspiracies violated international law or comity. For example, the attempt by the Kennedy administration to assassinate Castro and destabilize the Cuban economy, or to hire well-known criminals to kill Castro, was surely a criminal project. A prosecutor would have had little trouble bringing an indictment for criminal conspiracy. In whatever category we wish to place Operation Mongoose, we now know that a group of men did get together over a relatively long period within the American government to plot Castro's downfall. To Castro, this could have been understood as a conspiracy and an act of war. From the point of view of those committed to getting rid of the Cuban bone in the throat of American presidents, Operation Mongoose and the attempted assassination of Castro might have been understood as the height of good government and an effective use of American power.<sup>8</sup> It should hardly

<sup>7</sup> Report of the Warren Commission, 434-35.

<sup>8</sup> Note how the same style continues. In February of 1992, the present head of the CIA was in the Middle East attempting to find ways of deposing and assassinating Saddam Hussein. A few years ago,

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come as a surprise that real personal consequences might have followed for President Kennedy or his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy. Indeed, in a Senate Intelligence Committee report of 1975, former Senator Richard Schweiker concluded that pro-Castro Cubans killed Kennedy because of the attempts made on Castro's life. Castro continues to deny the charge and genuflects before Kennedy's memory.

The idea of Soviet involvement in the assassination, a fear that President Johnson expressed, was dissolved by the Warren Commission and Soviet KGB agents who later defected to the United States. No one wanted the assassination of a president to become a *casus belli* for nuclear war, least of all the establishments of the Soviet Union and the United States. Increasing its hold on the popular consciousness, however, is the story that the Kennedy assassination was a classic state murder to be analyzed by means of the "who benefits?" platitude of vulgar political science. *JFK* posits a massive conspiracy within the government and outside of it. The conspirators worked together to assassinate the president. The film insinuates that Johnson had criminal knowledge of what would happen to Kennedy if he visited Dallas and, furthermore, claims that Johnson paid off members of the military-industrial complex with a war in Indochina. Two other possible conspiracies are presented but given less weight, namely that an anti-Castro group killed Kennedy or that a Mafia group killed him. Indeed, the House Committee that investigated the assassination of President Kennedy gave credence to the idea that organized crime was involved in his assassination. Apparently, there are illegal wiretaps that support this theory. Robert Kennedy's Justice Department had carried on a campaign against organized crime with the president's blessing. The Teamsters, especially Jimmy Hoffa, hated the Kennedys. Hoffa believed that the Kennedy campaign had unleashed a vendetta against the Teamsters as a way to get to the White House. Hoffa and organized crime had ample reason to get even. Jack Ruby had numerous connections to the Mob that were not adequately explored at the time, according to a number of analysts of the Warren Commission report, including David Scheim in *Contract on America*. With many others (starting with Penn Jones and including Oliver Stone), Scheim points out that the inordinate number of witnesses who were murdered or died in suspicious circumstances are classic examples of Mafia involvement.<sup>9</sup> Of course, a murder caused by organized crime may show the integral connections between crime and politics, but it does not rise to proportions that would cause fear and dread about the political system itself.

THE THEORY I PRESENTED IN A *Yale Law Journal* review of Mark Lane's important book, *Rush to Judgment*, embraced the idea of a possible conspiracy initiated by a group of anti-Castro Cubans who had been assets of the CIA but who had slipped

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the government claimed that the Libyans had sent terrorist gangs to kill President Reagan, and in April 1986 Reagan sought to assassinate Muammar Qadhafi through massive bombing of his bunker.

<sup>9</sup> David E. Scheim, *Contract on America: The Mafia Murders of John and Robert Kennedy* (Silver Spring, Md., 1983), chap. 3, p. 50 and following.

out of the CIA's control. In 1963, the Cuban exile community harbored great anger against President Kennedy. Various groups unauthorized by the CIA had been picked up and stopped from carrying out covert activities against Cuba. They had continued raids after the short-lived détente that developed between the United States and the Soviets after the Cuban missile crisis.<sup>10</sup> And the CIA was very much involved with the Cuban exile community. Its largest station was in Miami in 1963, and it supported a wide variety of groups with weapons, money, and "technical assistance." There was, however, a political process of "simulopts" that was followed during the Kennedy administration. Simultaneous and contradictory policy options were pursued in order to see which would bear fruit. On the same day, November 22, 1963, that President Kennedy sent a message through the French journalist Jean Daniel to Castro that the United States wanted peace with Cuba, the CIA's Desmond Fitzgerald was negotiating in Paris with an assassin about killing Castro with a poison-tipped pen. JFK did not authorize Fitzgerald

It was taken for granted in the CIA and Cuban exile community that a *démarche* had occurred in American policy the year before, after the Cuban missile crisis of October–November 1962. This change in fundamental policy split the CIA, for there were many such as Howard Hunt, a very active operative, who felt that Kennedy had sold out the Cuban exile movement and its attempt to destroy the Castro government at the Bay of Pigs and thereafter. He hated the New Frontiersmen who, he thought, were besmirching the good name of Allen Dulles and the CIA. Moreover, Kennedy's June 10, 1963, speech at American University called for an end to the Cold War as well as general and complete disarmament. After the speech, and within a month, the United States, through Averell Harriman and Carl Kaysen, signed an agreement to ban nuclear testing in the atmosphere, in space, and under water. In order to obtain support from the Joint Chiefs, Kennedy found himself having to agree to a hugely expanded underground nuclear testing program. This was also the only way that Kennedy was able to secure the support of both conservatives and national security liberals in the Senate such as Everett Dirksen and Henry Jackson.

In assessing Kennedy's record on national security and the effect it might or might not have had on his own assassination, it is important to remember that he signed his name to budgets and doctrines that caused the defense budget to jump within two and a half years from 39.5 billion dollars to approximately 52 billion. Former President Eisenhower complained bitterly about this increase and stated publicly that the Kennedy budget was wasteful, having virtually nothing to do with defense. In 1960, however, Kennedy had campaigned on the idea of flexible response and closing the missile gap. Of course, the missile gap of the early 1960s turned out to be the opposite of what was believed. The Soviets had between three and six liquid-fuel, long-range missiles, which could be easily spotted because of the relatively long lead time necessary to get them ready for firing, yet the United States continued to build huge numbers of missiles even after intelligence revealed that the Soviets had very few. Secretary McNamara also adopted a counterforce strategy in the early years, which became the ideological reason for

<sup>10</sup> Raskin, *Yale Law Journal*, 579 and following.

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continuing to arm on the nuclear level at a furious pace. But McNamara's position on the size of the arsenal was for far less than the requests made by the Joint Chiefs in 1961–1962.

The second major shift from the Eisenhower administration, Kennedy's decision to accept the idea of flexible response, meant that the United States would not only fight limited and nuclear wars but that it would also challenge local revolutions and wars of national liberation to which Premier Khrushchev had given some support, both rhetorical and real. McNamara made the following request, summing up the Kennedy administration's defense policy before the House Armed Services Committee in 1964 as it related to the arms build-up:

A 100 percent increase in the number of nuclear weapons available in the strategic alert forces.

A 45 percent increase in the number of combat-ready army divisions.

A one third increase in the number of tactical fighter squadrons.

A 60 percent increase in the tactical nuclear forces deployed in western Europe.

A 75 percent increase in airlift capability.

A 100 percent increase in general ship construction and conversion.

A sixfold increase in counterinsurgency forces.

McNamara also pointed to the "demonstrated willingness to risk using these forces in defense of our vital interests. Here are some examples: The callup of about 150,000 reservists and the deployment of 40,000 additional men in Europe in the summer of 1961. The confrontation of Khrushchev on the issue of Soviet offensive missiles in Cuba in October of 1962. The dispatch of 16,000 U.S. military personnel to South Vietnam to assist that country with logistics and training support in combating the Vietcong insurrection."<sup>11</sup>

As I have stated elsewhere, "The United States intended under Kennedy to develop a war fighting capability on all levels of violence from nuclear war to counterinsurgency."<sup>12</sup> The irony in analyzing the militarization of American foreign policy, and by inference, American life, can be found in a speech that President Kennedy was to deliver at the Trade Mart in Dallas on November 22, 1963. Dallas was one of the main industrial arteries of the national security state. Texas had gained much<sup>3</sup> from the Cold War, and there was real concern that Kennedy was a secret dove. He intended to point out to the Texas audience that this was not the case. "In less than 3 years, we have increased by 50 percent the number of Polaris submarines . . . , increased by more than 75 percent our Minuteman purchase program, increased by 50 percent the portion of our strategic bombers on 15 minute alert and increased by 100 percent the total number of nuclear weapons available in our strategic alert forces . . . [We have] . . . radically improved the readiness of our conventional forces—increased by 45 percent the number of combat ready Army divisions, increased by 100 percent the procurement of modern Army weapons and equipment, increased by 100 percent our ship construction, conversion and modernization program, increased

<sup>11</sup> House Committee on Armed Services, *Sundry Legislation Affecting the Military Establishments*, Testimony of Robert McNamara, p. 6899 (1964).

<sup>12</sup> Marcus G. Raskin, "The Kennedy Hawks Assume Power from the Eisenhower Vultures," *Essays of a Citizen: From National Security State to Democracy* (Armonk, N.Y., 1991), 52–53.

by 100 percent our procurement of tactical aircraft, increased by 30 percent the number of tactical air squadrons . . . Finally, moving beyond the traditional roles of our military forces, we have achieved an increase of nearly 600 percent in our special forces" namely, those forces that were used in South Vietnam.<sup>13</sup>

The Kennedy policy on armaments and doctrine merely begins the puzzle. There is no question that President Kennedy intended to pull 1,000 advisers out of Vietnam by the end of 1963, and there is some evidence to support the view that he intended to pull all advisers out by 1965. According to Roger Hilsman, a former assistant secretary of state who dealt with Southeast Asia and held repeated discussions with President Kennedy, it was Kennedy's intention to work out a negotiated settlement along the lines of the one with Laos.<sup>14</sup> Yet there is a wrinkle here. Ngo Dinh Nhu, who was assassinated at the same time as his brother President Ngo Dinh Diem on November 2, 1963, had sought to work out a settlement with the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong. This diplomatic intervention was interrupted by their assassinations. The Kennedy administration had, according to Henry Kissinger, a "direct role" in the coup against Diem "which led to his assassination."<sup>15</sup> The Kennedy policies were ambiguous. On the one hand, the president had made numerous public statements to the effect that the war had to be won by the South Vietnamese government, not by the United States. On the other, the war was seen as something of a game of chess that the United States could walk away from any time it desired; but, if the cost was not too great, we should continue to play.

Theodore White, in his book *In Search of History*, claims that Kennedy intended to get out of Vietnam and not go forward with a full-scale war. According to Kenneth O'Donnell, Kennedy's principal political adviser, "Kennedy had just pledged to Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield not only the immediate withdrawal of one thousand troops of the sixteen thousand troops in Vietnam, but the withdrawal of all of them after the 1964 election." When O'Donnell asked Kennedy how he meant to do that, he quipped, "Easy, put a government in there that will ask us to leave."<sup>16</sup> This part of Stone's contention appears to be on solid ground.

A QUESTION REMAINS ABOUT PRESIDENT JOHNSON and his interest in going to war in Indochina. Although Johnson had made a trip to Vietnam in 1961 and came back trumpeting the Walt Rostow-Maxwell Taylor thesis, there is also evidence that he too was dubious about war on the Asian mainland. In 1954, when Johnson was the majority leader of the Senate, he made clear to Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles that he would not support American military intervention at Dien Bien Phu, nor could he carry the Senate with such support unless Britain and

<sup>13</sup> John F. Kennedy, undelivered speech, November 22, 1963, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States* . . . (Washington, D.C., 1980).

<sup>14</sup> Roger Hilsman, Letter to the Editor, *New York Times* (January 20, 1992).

<sup>15</sup> Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston, 1979), 231.

<sup>16</sup> Theodore H. White, *In Search of History: A Personal Narrative* (New York, 1978), 531.

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France fought side by side with the United States. So what caused his shift in point of view to supporting the Kennedy hawks' position?

As Stone intimates, there were a number of high-level national security meetings with Johnson immediately after Kennedy's death. The meeting that is best known was with leading advisers of the Kennedy administration, namely Dean Rusk, McGeorge Bundy, McNamara, Maxwell Taylor (Chair of the Joint Chiefs), John A. McCone of Central Intelligence, and Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge. At that meeting, it was decided to go ahead with the war even though Taylor and McNamara had prepared at Kennedy's request a two-volume study, NSAM 263, which outlined a withdrawal program. This was presented at an NSC meeting on October 5, 1963. Nevertheless, Taylor, an early proponent of brush-fire wars, and McNamara, a convert to the same sublimated war doctrine, were hawks. In the fateful days after the Kennedy assassination, they told Johnson that the war was local and limited and that, with Diem out of the way, the American commitment should be strengthened with U.S. combat forces because the war could be won. Rusk had a strong commitment to American intervention in Indochina because of his belief in the Sino-Soviet bloc relationship (an alliance that had already ended) and because, as Rusk put it, the Soviets "blinked" during the Cuban missile crisis; thus they were not likely to be a factor in inhibiting American intervention. It was thought by one assistant secretary of state that Bundy, who knew better, went along for reasons of ambition. He hoped to replace Rusk in 1965 as secretary of state and then end the war. Taylor wanted to test out his flexible-response theories.

At this stage, we can only speculate on President Johnson's motives. One view is that his understanding of the Kennedy policy was to go forward with the war and that any softening on his part would have brought down the wrath of Robert Kennedy upon him. The attorney general had been a strong proponent during the Kennedy period of covert operations and sublimated war engagements. These included engagement in Vietnam, but Robert Kennedy ceased to be a friend of the CIA.

Johnson, who had imbibed the metaphors of Munich and falling dominoes, was reinforced by his own insecurity about foreign affairs and his fear that he would be blindsided by the Kennedy advisers, some of whom had wanted him off the ticket in 1964. He would be seen as an illegitimate imposter to the presidency who tampered with Kennedy's stated policies. (Given Robert Kennedy's stated positions, Johnson could not have imagined that Robert Kennedy would blindside him from a dove rather than a hawk position.)

The role of the military during this violent period is also ambiguous. The generals who had fought in the Korean War, MacArthur and Ridgeway, were adamantly opposed to war on the mainland of Asia. General Matthew Ridgeway was a charter member of the "never again" club. Having replaced MacArthur in the Korean War, Ridgeway argued in a continuous barrage of memoranda that the United States should steer clear of an Asian land war. However, the Taylor position held sway, and it led quickly to dramatic escalations.

It should be remembered that in the initial stages of the war it was the civilian hawks left over from the Kennedy administration who rallied around a land war.

They believed in the idea of a world-wide conflict with communism and in the domino effect; that is, if Vietnam fell, all of Southeast Asia was doomed. This was not Kennedy's view, Theodore Sorensen's view, or that of the few "doves" of the Kennedy administration who, after the Cuban missile crisis, believed strongly in accommodation. The policy of détente had been reflected earlier in Kennedy's successful settlement of the Laotian war, his calling off the Cold War, and his interest in pressing forward with a general and complete disarmament treaty. In a May 6, 1963, memorandum to the leading national security advisers, Kennedy voiced his deep concern about the arms race and ordered the government to prepare extensive plans for general and complete disarmament. It is likely that the president was reacting to Jerome Wiesner, the science adviser who in December 1962 had told and written Kennedy that the McNamara defense build-up was an unmitigated disaster for the national security of the United States, that it forced the Soviets to follow the United States in the arms race, thereby making the United States less secure.<sup>17</sup> The Cuban missile crisis underscored his advice.

Would any of the top Kennedy advisers for reasons of ambition, a need to test out a pet theory, for money, sex, or because of ideological persuasion participate or initiate a coup? There seems to be no hard evidence for such a conclusion. Is it possible that, as with the death of Thomas Becket, a culture of violence and command would give some conspirators at a lower level inside and outside the government the idea that a murder should occur? This is somewhat more likely, given the conflating of crime and political intrigue in the covert and military world of that time.

The film points to two figures who are unnamed. One is the <sup>How?</sup> Donald Sutherland character, who is probably Colonel Fletcher Prouty. The other is his boss, who sends security specialist Prouty off to the South Pole to prevent him from ensuring Kennedy's safety in Dallas. His boss would have been General Edward Lansdale, who had cut his teeth in the 1950s by making Ramon Magsaysay a hero of Philippine limited land reform and the victor against the Huk rebellion. Lansdale then promoted Magsaysay into the presidency of the Philippines and went on to work on different schemes for pacifying Vietnam and Cuba. It does not seem likely that as hawkish as Lansdale or the first-level advisers were, they would have been involved in a plot to kill President Kennedy in order to press a war and prove their ideological doctrines. However, it should be noted that most of Kennedy's advisers were far more hawkish than he. For example, advisers such as Walt Rostow, who later succeeded Bundy, had urged the use of American ground troops and the bombing of the North. As I have noted, this refrain was also sung by Johnson when he was vice-president and by General Taylor, who, prior to becoming chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was Kennedy's personal military adviser. The willingness of these advisers to kill others does not mean that they intended to or did kill the president of the United States. There is no question, however, that a culture of violence was integral to that period and that it permeated all levels of government.

<sup>17</sup> Jerome B. Wiesner to President John F. Kennedy, memorandum, December 4, 1962, John F. Kennedy Library, Waltham, Mass.

JFK also raises the question of CIA involvement in the assassination. It should be noted that those concerned with analysis of data and political trends in the Agency were eager for the United States to work out a negotiated settlement in Vietnam. To that end, they made public a document carrying the CIA's official imprimatur and calling for an end to the war in 1964. However, the question of CIA involvement in the assassination is much less easy to slough off when one notes the intimate connection the CIA had with Cuban exile groups in Miami. For that matter, the FBI also had connections with groups it had infiltrated or with individuals it used as informants as well as with extreme rightist businessmen it protected who hated President Kennedy. These connections occurred to the Warren Commission as well.

One recommendation the commission made was that the FBI, CIA, and other agencies should inform the Secret Service when a potential threat existed to the president's life. "Since these agencies are already obliged constantly to evaluate the activities of such groups, they should be responsible for advising the Secret Service if information develops indicating the existence of an assassination plot and for reporting such events as a change in leadership or dogma which indicate that the group may present a danger to the President. Detailed formal agreements embodying these arrangements should be worked out between the Secret Service and both of these agencies."<sup>18</sup>

It is hardly surprising that the culture of violence extending into the presidency through national security decisions also allowed government officials to use organized crime and, when necessary, to confront it. Robert Kennedy as attorney general initiated a "war on crime" at the same time that the CIA sought aid from criminals in attempting to assassinate Castro.

DISCUSSIONS GO ON ALL THE TIME about killing the president. These inchoate conspiracies abound in the nation. They come to very little. That they exist, however, should not be denied. That they are exacerbated by a culture of violence is obvious. And that the Warren Commission saw its primary goal as calming the people is clear. At the time, Bertrand Russell claimed that "there has never been a more subversive, a more conspiratorial, unpatriotic or endangering course for the security of the United States and the world than the attempt by the United States Government to hide the murderer of its recent President."<sup>19</sup>

The nation is again undertaking an Oedipal odyssey, looking for itself through this heinous murder. If we are mature enough to continue the search, it is well that not only the files of this terrible tragedy be made public but that the various people who have had access to these files be subject to oaths to assure the citizenry that documents have not been destroyed. Another step will have to be taken: files of the CIA, Department of Justice, and defense agencies will now have to be opened so that we may understand more completely the culture of violence that enveloped the nation during the Cold War period. We will not be able to assess a

<sup>18</sup> *Report of the Warren Commission*, 440.

<sup>19</sup> Bertrand Russell, quoted by Salisbury, *Report of the Warren Commission*, xxv.

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single-bullet or lone-assassin theory unless we recognize the billion-bullet/nuclear weapons-and-missile system that dictated and framed our society's reality. Most important, however, if we choose to continue with national security state secrets of the kind that enveloped the assassination of Kennedy, then the nation psychologically will continue to be tortured by lies. The culture of violence and secrecy will hold sway; cynicism and alienation in its nastiest political sense will grow even greater.

There is a substantial body of actual and absolutely credible official evidence about the JFK assassination. Casper and notably others ignore and of which they are ignorant. Some is in what the commission published, some is in its files and I am, to a large degree, responsible for the vast volume of narrowly withheld records disclosed as a result of about a dozen FOIA lawsuits I filed. Some were pre-empted and one was responsible for the 1974 amending of the investigatory files exemption as the direct result of which I alone got about a third of a million pages and others continued to obtain a great volume.



Kennedy's death, of the communist takeover of Washington.<sup>2</sup> Stone's conspiracy is anti-communist. As *JFK* unfolds, it reveals that an omnipresent "they" killed not only John Kennedy but also Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., that "they" seized power in a "coup d'état," and that Lyndon Johnson was an "accomplice after the fact." Stone's assassins murdered Kennedy to stop him from withdrawing from Vietnam, making peace with Cuba, and ending the Cold War. But "they" killed a president who (as the movie does not say) increased military spending, heated up Cold War rhetoric, intensified the American intervention in Vietnam, and sponsored, until his own assassination, death plots against Fidel Castro.

Resembling traditional American conspiracy theories, Stone's demonology makes an easy target for those defending the allegedly beleaguered political elites smeared by *JFK*. From their perspective, the syndicated political commentator William Pfaff's, for example, Oliver Stone is a New Left McCarthyite. But such a view is maliciously ahistorical. Kennedy was no New Left hero, for either civil rights activists in the early 1960s (since his Justice Department and FBI worked against them) or for the anti-war movement that emerged after his death. Stone, in turn, is a product not of the rise of the New Left but of its demise. Blaming the New Left counterposes *JFK*'s paranoia to a rational governing class, making it impossible to understand either the power of the movie or where it goes wrong. Stone's films assault the viewer, and some commentators have protected themselves by keeping their distance from *JFK*. But if we accept the invitation to enter the Kennedy assassination from Garrison's point of view (I refer throughout to the film's Garrison, Kevin Costner), then we can trace the path from legitimate political disorientation to the moment when Garrison reaches obsession.

Since the publication of Edward Epstein's *Inquest* a quarter-century ago, reasonable people have had to doubt the Warren Commission, lone assassin, "magic bullet" (as Garrison calls it) version of the killing of Kennedy.<sup>3</sup> (Stone's defense of his movie, in a February 3, 1992, letter to the *New York Times*, focuses entirely on the deficiencies of the Warren Commission.) In the first portion of *JFK*, a disorienting montage draws the viewer into the evidence of other assassins, other bullets, other places from which Kennedy may have been shot. Rarely have the camera shot and the gun shot been more aligned, with the viewer at once behind the telephoto lens and, like Kennedy, its target.

Reasonable people have also had to acknowledge, for a quarter-century, the power of secret government in the United States, hidden both in its unaccountable decision making at the top and its covert operations on the ground. The achievements of that government (many of which are, by the same technique of discontinuous assault, detailed in the film) include: the recruitment of Nazis to work for the CIA in the Cold War; the CIA-sponsored coups against Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala and Muhammad Musaddiq in Iran; the FBI, Military

<sup>2</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (New York, 1965), 110-11; John A. Stormer, *None Dare Call It Treason* (Florissant, Mo., 1964).

<sup>3</sup> Edward Jay Epstein, *Inquest: The Warren Commission and the Establishment of Truth*, Richard H. Rovere, intro. (New York, 1966).

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Intelligence, and CIA operations against domestic dissent; Watergate; Iran-Contra.

It is plausible, moreover, to link the Kennedy assassination to secret government interventions during the Cold War. Since the Watergate burglars were anti-Castro Cubans implicated in Kennedy's plots to kill Castro, President Nixon justified the Watergate cover-up on national security grounds, to keep secret the Kennedy-Cuba connection.<sup>4</sup> Nixon imagined Lee Harvey Oswald as Castro's avenger. Leftist versions of the assassination propose other ties: to anti-Castro Cuban exiles, to the Cuban exile/Mafia/Kennedy tangle; to people in the national security bureaucracy; to the family of deposed South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem, murdered in the Kennedy-sponsored coup. The scenarios bewilder by their number and believability. Evidence for the withholding within government of information that might shed light on Kennedy's death is overwhelming. To attend seriously to Cold War politics and the Kennedy assassination is to risk being thrown back into the paranoid position (to use psychoanalyst Melanie Klein's term) of helpless, suspicious disorientation.<sup>5</sup>

The widespread feeling that America began to fall apart after Kennedy was killed prolongs national mourning; conversely, the extraordinary fixation on JFK is evidence of the public malaise. But the unresolved assassination, combined with Kennedy's complicity with the forces suspected of doing him in, has blocked a national mourning of the president as he actually was, encouraging the regression from what Klein calls the depressive position, where loss can be acknowledged and overcome, to idealization, splitting, and paranoia.

A plausible version of the assassination, like Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988), makes sense of the chaos surrounding Kennedy's death, but the price of sanity-restoring, narrative coherence is that the story be presented as fiction. *JFK* refuses the fictional label by insisting it has discovered the truth. But that rejection of fictional narrative entails another, of form as well as content, for Stone replaces a convincing, novelistic, plot-as-story with a mysterious, fragmentary, plot-as-conspiracy.

The elements of a plot in both those senses are set in New Orleans. Stone, however, provides no characters whose actions connect his sordid New Orleans revelations to the Washington scene of the crime. In the exception that explains the rule, a Washington messenger turns one of Garrison's staffers into a tool of the cover-up, preparing for a scene that will discredit the Mafia assassination theory (which contaminates Kennedy) by putting it into the renegade's mouth.

Stone has no problem finding anti-communist Kennedy haters, among both Bay of Pigs veterans and home-grown right-wingers. He accepts their view of Kennedy, inverts it, and makes it the instrument of the president's death. But to give the assassination its cosmic political significance, as the coup d'état source of all that has gone wrong in the country, Stone (himself a Vietnam veteran) also needs a group that feared Kennedy was withdrawing from Southeast Asia. It is

<sup>4</sup> See Fawn M. Brodie, *Richard Nixon: The Shaping of His Character* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), 493-96.

<sup>5</sup> Melanie Klein, *Love, Guilt, and Reparation and Other Works*, R. E. Money-Kyrle, intro. (New York, 1975).

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harder to give verisimilitude to that story. As a result, *JFK's* political content and filmic method come to mirror the conspiracy the movie is supposedly exposing. When narrative history fails Stone, his plot splits in two: idealization of the beautiful "dying king" on the one hand, demonization of a homosexual band on the other. Sexual anxiety overwhelms politics, in *JFK's* paranoid style, as a homosexual primal horde slays the young father-king.

Although Garrison complains that the government infantilizes its citizens by keeping them from the truth, his Americans are never adults; they are Hamlets, "children of the slain father-leader whose killers still possess the throne." Stormer's *None Dare Call It Treason's* dedication—"to Holly, May her future be as bright as mine was at age 5"—speaks equally to the cry of betrayed innocence that drives *JFK*; Stone's film is "Dedicated to the young." The beautiful object of the viewer's desire in the nostalgic newsreel footage we watch along with Garrison, Kennedy is felled by the perverted desire of David Ferrie and Clay Shaw. Stone's Kennedy is at once the "father-leader" whose killing unleashes chaos and the beautiful young man (synecdochical for Garrison and the male viewer) endangered by erotic attraction.

With David Ferrie (the pilot linked to the CIA and Operation Mongoose), homophobia and conspiracy each first enter the movie, joined together on Ferrie's body. An announced "alleged homosexual incident," preceding the report of his anti-Castro activities, frames our first view of Ferrie. His flimsy story supposedly makes Garrison suspect a plot, but what fills the screen is Ferrie's nervous, flitty manner. That a middle-aged degenerate drove to Dallas with "a couple of young friends" only to hunt birds raises sexual as much as political suspicion. The two come together again in the figure of the attractive, corrupted, imprisoned homosexual prostitute, Willie O'Keefe. (Unlike Ferrie and Shaw, this figure, played by Kevin Bacon, is Stone's invention.) In the conspiratorial connections with which O'Keefe floods Garrison, sexual and political perversions are entirely intertwined. Disguise is at the heart of the "homosexual underground," O'Keefe tells the district attorney. "You don't know shit because you've never been fucked in the ass." Graphic words and images depicting some men dominating others, rather than a political narrative, links invisible Washington power to New Orleans sex. The male prostitute propositions Garrison when the interview is over. The district attorney's interrogation and trial of the homosexual businessman, Clay Shaw ("the guy's a fag"), now organizes Stone's conspiracy. Homosexual blackmail, perverted sexual practices, and murder merge in Ferrie's confession to Garrison, shortly before he is murdered in turn. Kennedy was killed, the film comes close to saying, because he refused to submit to homosexual domination.

When Garrison's wife accuses him of caring more about Kennedy than his own family, she points to the absence of heterosexual desire that feeds the homosexual threat. (From one side, *JFK* inherits Stone's misogyny; from the other, it derives from *No Way Out*, the 1987 espionage thriller in which the character played by Kevin Costner is framed for murder by a homosexual in love with the real killer, his State Department boss.) Homosexual panic may not be the universal ground of paranoia, as Freud argued in the Daniel Paul Schreber case, but it organizes *JFK*. Schreber believed that invisible rays emanating from an authoritative source

were turning him into a woman and forcing him to give birth. Such an omnipotent force slays the president; first in the shooting, then in the horrifying reenactment of Kennedy's autopsy, the extraction of his brain from his head, its instruments violate, for Stone as for Schreber, the vulnerable male body.<sup>6</sup>

Sensory overload characterizes Stone's film technique in general, but whereas flashbacks and editing establish eyewitness authority for the conspiracy, the homosexual scenes carry the weight of emotional disturbance. Montages of body parts, a transvestite bacchanal, and the strange movements of Ferrie and Shaw overwhelm visual and narrative coherence. Just as Stone blends the camera shot and the gun shot, so his rapid cutting, sudden close-ups, and bodily dismemberments join the filmic to the sexual fetish. Cinematic form enforces the disorienting fragmentation; homophobia is its content. Fragmentary details pregnant with meaning are the building blocks both of the content of political demonology and of Stone's paranoid film style. The director employs montage to return to the primitive, pre-illusionistic beginnings of motion pictures. Unlike classic narrative films, his images disperse rather than tell a story. But, unlike primitive cinema, Stone puts spectacle in the service of narrative. Intentionality at the top organizes the charged data of Stone's animistic universe. Conspiracy supplies the formal and final causes (in Aristotle's classification) that restore psycho-political order.

Whereas the fragments are disturbingly visible, however, the unity can only be told. The Abraham Zapruder film of Kennedy's assassination is shown over and over, frame by frame, as if it held the key to the plot, but the visual bludgeoning leads to confusion, not unambiguous conclusion. Only words keep Zapruder from turning into *Blow-Up*, Michelangelo Antonioni's 1969 film in which murder remains mysterious because the picture keeps the secret of whether it has a secret at all. Coherence in *JFK* is supplied by the longest monologues in Hollywood history. These voice-overs, spoken from within the diegesis and illustrated by streams of juxtaposed images, offer the structure for which the viewer, even more than before entering the theater, now longs. But the monologues cannot make actual connections, any more than could a traditional filmic narrative, for those would be vulnerable to exposure as fiction. *JFK*'s Deep Throat authorizes the conspiracy, his soliloquy supported by flashbacks that are keyed to his subjective account but shown as historical truth. Urging Garrison to bring Shaw to trial without knowing how everything fits together, this paternal figure prepares us to experience Shaw's acquittal as evidence that the conspiracy goes on. Garrison's thirty-five minute speech to Shaw's jury brings the film to an end.

Demonology imagines that a secret power is exercised on the body; thus sexual fantasy has always been part of the American paranoid style. In Maria Monk's antebellum, anti-Catholic, non-fiction best seller, for example, priests kidnap and engage in criminal intercourse with nuns.<sup>7</sup> Women's liberation, interfering with

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Paul Schreber, *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, Ida Macalpine and Richard H. Hunter, trans. and ed.; Samuel Weber, intro. (Cambridge, Mass., 1988); Sigmund Freud, "Psycho-Analytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides)," in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols., James Strachey, ed., vol. 12 (London, 1953-74).

<sup>7</sup> Maria Monk, *Awful Disclosure of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal* (1836; rev. with appendix, New York, 1977).

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the rape-and-rescue erotics of female victimization, may contribute to the shift from heterosexual to homosexual sadomasochism; if this postfeminist movie does not target threatening women, it marginalizes them instead. But the wish that women go away returns to haunt male connections. Moreover, although the story presents homosexual contagion as the cause of the assassination, the spectacle presents it as the consequence, since we meet the primal horde knowing that Kennedy is dead. Homosexual contagion is at once source and result of the killing, making the spread of alternative sexualities one more disaster for which Kennedy's death is to blame.

But the sexual politics of *JFK* is perhaps more the product of Washington men than feminists and gays. It illustrates with particular, sensate force how disorienting powerlessness invades the psyche, threatening to turn men into receptacles for sadomasochistic possession. (American male impotence as the tragedy of Vietnam is explicit in Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July* [1989] and almost as close to the surface in George Bush's Vietnam syndrome.) *JFK* deserves the attention it is getting neither as a political understanding of the assassination and its aftermath nor as a McCarthyite assault on vulnerable elites but rather for making us experience how politically produced paranoid anxieties, somatized on the visually produced mass body, turn into paranoid analysis.

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Just one report what Stone himself said of his movie & his surprises

ROBERT A. ROSENSTONE

TO THOSE OF US INTERESTED IN HISTORICAL FILMS, the fuss in the media over *JFK* feels familiar. Complaints that the film bends and twists history; accusations that director Oliver Stone willfully mixes fact and fiction, fails to delineate clearly between evidence and speculation, creates characters who never existed, and incidents that never occurred—these are the sorts of charges made every time a historical film on a sensitive subject appears. With *JFK*, the controversy is particularly heated because of both the topic and its treatment. The film hits us with a double whammy: one of America's most popular directors not only explores our recent history's most touchy subject but does so in a bravura motion picture that (maybe it's a triple whammy) also takes a highly critical stance toward major branches of the American government.

Complaints over the misuse of history in film seem to be based on two notions: first, that a historical film is no more than a piece of written history transferred to the screen and thus subject to the same rules of historical practice; and, second, that a fact is a fact and history is little more than an organized compilation of such facts. We who write history should find these assertions questionable. At the least, we have to be aware that "facts" never stand alone but are always called forth (or constituted) by the work in which they then become embedded. In order to evaluate the way in which any work of history—including the motion picture—uses facts (or data) to evoke the past, we must investigate the aims, forms, and possibilities of the kind of historical project in which those data appear.

All this is to say something simple but important: a film is not a book. To judge the contribution of a work like *JFK*, we must try to understand just what it is a historical film can do.

As a dramatic motion picture, *JFK* comes to us in a form that has been virtually unexplored by people interested in the study of past events. Neither historians nor filmmakers have given much thought to the most basic questions about the possibilities and standards of history when it is represented in the visual media. Evaluations of historical films in essays and reviews are always made on an individual basis. Certainly, the historical profession has no agreed-upon way to answer any of the following questions: What kind of historical knowledge or understanding can a historical film provide? How can we situate it in relation to written history? What are its responsibilities to the historical "fact"? What can it tell us about the past that the written word cannot?

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Such questions are too broad to answer here, but they are good to keep in mind as we think about *JFK*. My aim in what follows is less to deal with the contributions and shortcomings of the film than to approach it as part of a tradition. I want to situate *JFK* as both a certain kind of film and a certain kind of historical film. Placed in this context, the factual "errors" (if one wants to term them that) of the work will appear to be less the fault of the filmmaker than a condition of the medium and the kind of movie he has chosen to make. The contributions (if one wants to call them that) of the film, on the other hand, are in large measure its own. They derive less from the form of the film than from the way that form has been put to use.

THERE IS NO SINGLE WAY TO DO HISTORY ON FILM. The traditional division into the dramatic work and the documentary is increasingly irrelevant as recent films (*JFK* included) often blur the distinction between the two. My own research has suggested that history on film comes in a number of different forms. *JFK*, despite the many documentary elements it contains, belongs to what is certainly the most popular type of film, the Hollywood—or mainstream—drama. This sort of film is marked, as cinema scholars have shown, by a number of characteristics, the chief being its desire to make us believe that what we see in the theater is true. To this end, the mainstream film utilizes a specific film language, a self-effacing, seamless language of shot, editing, and sound designed to make the screen seem no more than a window onto unmediated "reality."

Along with "realism," four other elements are crucial to understanding the mainstream historical film:

Hollywood history is delivered in a story with beginning, middle, end—a story with a moral message and one usually embodied in a progressive view of history.

This story is closed, completed, and, ultimately, simple. Alternative versions of the past are not shown; the *Rashomon* approach is never used in such works.

History is a story of individuals—usually, heroic individuals who do unusual things for the good of others, if not all humankind (ultimately, the audience).

Historical issues are personalized, emotionalized, and dramatized—for film appeals to our feelings as a way of adding to our knowledge or affecting our beliefs.

Such elements go a long way toward explaining the shape of *JFK*. The story is not that of President Kennedy but of Jim Garrison, the heroic, embattled, incorruptible investigator who wishes to make sense of Kennedy's assassination and its apparent cover-up, not just for himself but for his country and its traditions—that is, for the audience, for us. More than almost any other historical film, this one swamps us with information. Some of it, in the black-and-white flashbacks that illustrate the stages of the investigation, is tentative or contradictory. (So much is thrown at us that, on a single viewing, the viewer has difficulty absorbing all the details of events discussed and shown.) Yet, even if contradictions do exist, the main line of the story is closed and completed, and the moral message is clear: the assassination was the result of a conspiracy that involved

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agencies and officials of the U.S. government, the aim of the assassination was to get rid of a president who wished to curb the military and end the Cold War, and the "fascist" groups responsible for the assassination and the subsequent cover-up are a clear and continuing threat to what little is left of American democracy.

*generality but not true in this case*

LET ME PUT IT SIMPLY: if the conventions of the mainstream historical film make it difficult for such works to create a past that stays within the norms by which we judge written history, certain other factors make it impossible. It is not just that most of the data by which we know the past comes from the realm of words and that the filmmaker is always involved in a good deal of translation from one medium to another, attempting to find a visual equivalent for written evidence. It is also that the mainstream historical film is shot through with fiction or invention from smallest of details to largest events. (Historians do not, of course, approve of fiction, aside from the underlying fiction that the past itself can be truly told in neat, linear stories.) Invention occurs for at least two reasons: the requirements of dramatic structure and the need of camera to fill out the specifics of historical scenes.

Drama demands the invention of incidents and characters because historical events rarely occur with the kind of shape, order, and intensity that will keep an audience in its seats. Inventions move the story forward, keep emotions high, and order complex series of events into plausible structures that will fit within filmic time constraints. When *JFK* creates a fascist, homosexual prisoner named Willie O'Keefe to give Garrison the evidence that Clay Shaw was involved with Lee Harvey Oswald, or invents a Deep Throat character in Washington (played by Donald Sutherland) to help Garrison make sense of all the evidence he has gathered by providing a theory to hold it all together, one can see that Oliver Stone is doing no more than finding a plausible, dramatic way of summarizing evidence that comes from too many sources to depict on the screen.

Invention due to the demands of the camera may be a subtler factor, but it is no less significant in shaping the historical film. Consider, for example, something as simple as the furnishings in a room where a historical character sits—Jim Garrison's office or conference room, or Clay Shaw's apartment. Or think of the clothing that characters wear. Or the words they speak. All such elements have to be approximate rather than literal representations. They say: this is more or less the way Garrison's room looked in 1966, or these are the kinds of clothes a character might well have worn, or these are likely examples of the words he or she spoke.

The same is true of individuals. This is not just a matter of the director making up characters. Even historical people become largely fictional on the screen. The very use of an actor to portray someone is itself a fiction. If the person is an actual historical figure such as Garrison, even if the actor looks like the figure (which is not true in *JFK*, for actor Kevin Costner looks little like the real Garrison, who in turn does not look much like Justice Earl Warren, the character he portrays), the film on a literal level says what cannot truly be said: not just that this is how the

*Generality in JFK makes the point to show us that it is not true in this case.  
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It's given upon these because it's on the light aspects in Dealey Plaza and with FBI as part of his professional work to say who was a historical representation of history. He could have used the FBI.*

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person looked but also that this is how he moved, and walked, and gestured, and this is how he sounded when he spoke.

To analyze a historical film is to see how small fictions—settings and clothing, the look and sound of characters—shade into larger and larger inventions. Even the tiniest sorts of fictions are not unimportant factors. At least, not if history is about the meaning of past events. In a medium in which visual evidence is crucial to understanding, such pervasive fictions are major contributors to the meaning of the film, including its historical meaning. So, too, is that elusive, extra-historical element, the aura carried by famous actors and actresses. A star like Kevin Costner, fresh from his award-winning *Dances with Wolves*, cannot simply disappear into the character of Garrison. From that film, he carries for many in the audience a strong feeling of the decent, simple, honest American, the war hero who more than a century ago was critical of a certain kind of expansionist militarism in American life.

LIKE A HISTORY BOOK, a historical film—despite Hollywood's desire for "realism"—is not a window onto the past but a construction of a past; like a history book, a film handles evidence from that past within a certain framework of possibilities and a tradition of practice. For neither the writer of history nor the director of a film is historical literalism a possibility. No matter how literal-minded a director might be, film cannot do more than point to the events of the past. At best, film can approximate historic moments, the things that were once said and done, but it cannot replicate them. Like the book, film will use evidence to create historical works, but this evidence will always be a highly reduced or concentrated sample; given its limited screen time, the film will never provide more than a fraction of the (traditional) data of a scholarly article on the same topic. Even as a lengthy, three-hour film that includes an unusually dense barrage of information, *JFK* must often make major points with sparse evidence or invented images. Within the world of the film, the idea that Kennedy was ready to withdraw American troops from Vietnam, for example, rests on the mention of a single memorandum and the testimony of a fictional character. The notion that black Americans loved Kennedy is conveyed by having a single woman say, "He did so much for this country, for colored people."

What I am suggesting is this: the Hollywood historical film will always include images that are at once invented and yet may still be considered true; true in that they symbolize, condense, or summarize larger amounts of data; true in that they carry out the overall meaning of the past that can be verified, documented, or reasonably argued. But, one may ask, how do we know what can be verified, documented, or reasonably argued? How do we know whether Kennedy was about to withdraw troops or whether he was loved by African Americans? Both of these highly debatable points must be answered from outside the film, from the ongoing discourse of history. From the existing body of historical texts. From their data and arguments. This need for outside verification is not unique to film. Any work about the past, be it a piece of written, visual, or oral history, enters a

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body of preexisting knowledge and debate. To be considered "historical," rather than simply a costume drama that uses the past as an exotic setting for romance and adventure, a film must engage the issues, ideas, data, and arguments of that discourse. Whatever else it does or does not do, *JFK* certainly meets these requirements as a work of history. *not data or real issues etc.*

The practice of written history is not a single kind of practice. And if that practice is dependent on data, its value and contribution have never been wholly a matter of those data and their accuracy. Certainly, different works of history use data in different ways, make different sorts of contributions to our understanding. Some works of history may be important chiefly for the data they create and deliver, others for their evocation of people and events of a vanished time and place. Some historical works are noted for their elegance of argument or skill at representation, others for raising new questions about the past or for raising old questions for a new generation.

It is the same with historical films. They come in different forms and they undertake different historical tasks. Some evoke the past, bringing it to life, giving us an intense feel for people, places, and moments long past—this surely is one of the glories of the motion picture. (Who can sit through *JFK* without reliving many of the agonies of the 1950s and 1960s that it depicts?) But film may do more than evoke: the historical film can be a stimulus to thought, an intervention into history, a way of re-visioning the past. We do not go to the Hollywood historical film for data but for drama. For the way it intensifies the issues of the past. For the way it shows us the world as process, makes us participate in the confusion, multiplicities, and complexities of events long past.

*Not what Stone does*

*like on what or not that was a wrong way?*

*JFK* is a film that undertakes more than one historical burden. Because it chooses as its central strategy an investigation of the past, the film has a self-reflexive edge, one that suggests much about the difficulty of any historical undertaking and the near impossibility of arriving at definitive historical truths. More important, perhaps, *JFK* makes an apparently old issue come to life—indeed, the reaction it has evoked makes it seem like a very successful piece of historical work. Not a work that tells us the truth about the past but one that questions the official truths about the past so provocatively that we are forced once again to look to history and consider what these events mean to us today. Like a good historian, Stone begins *JFK* with a preface that contains a thesis; he uses President Dwight Eisenhower's farewell address, with its warning about the possible effect of the military-industrial complex on the future of our country, to set the stage for a film that will illustrate the prescience of Ike's words. By doing this, Stone forces us to face the kind of large issue that a more sober historian, mired in a slough of information and worried about the judgments of professional colleagues, might find difficult to raise so sharply: has something gone wrong with America since the early sixties?

Director Oliver Stone has been faulted for thinking that many changes in the United States stem from a single act, the killing of John Kennedy, but others who are less sanguine about the judgments and actions of Kennedy may take him as a symbol. Certainly, the experience of the film, like that of any important work of history, resonates well beyond the ideas of its creator and speaks to and for those

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who do not share Stone's strong faith in Kennedy. When assessing *JFK*, one should ask this question: who else in America has dared to raise such historical issues so powerfully (or at all) in a popular medium? If it is part of the burden of the historical work to make us rethink how we got to where we are, and to make us question values that we and our leaders and our nation live by, then, whatever its flaws, *JFK* has to be among the most important works of American history ever to appear on the screen.