

New film fires a bullet at Specter's re-election

By Katharine Seelye
Inquirer Staff Writer

U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter, already running for re-election during a recession, suddenly finds himself with another load of unwanted baggage — courtesy of Hollywood.

Back in 1964, Specter was an investigator for the Warren Commission and posited the single-bullet theory — that one bullet hit President John F. Kennedy and wounded Texas Gov. John B. Connally Jr., precluding the necessity of a second gunman in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963.

In a freak accident of bad timing for Specter, the controversial movie *JFK* now resurrects the single-bullet theory and portrays it as utterly preposterous — with the bullet zigging, zagging, halting in midair and even at one point making "a dramatic U-turn." With it comes Specter's name — and the derisive hoots of moviegoers across the country. More than three million people have seen the film so far.

For Arlen Specter, the three-hour *JFK* movie boils down to the ultimate three-second negative political spot — when he is still smarting from criticism for his performance in grilling Anita Hill during the hearings on Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas.

In the movie — widely discredited in the mainstream press — Kevin Costner, playing New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, calls Specter "an ambitious junior counselor" and brands his theory "one of the grossest lies ever forced on the American people." At the mention of Specter's name, some members of some audiences in Philadelphia and elsewhere hoot, cheer and applaud in apparent agreement with the disparaging reference.

Specter, who stands by the theory
(See SPECTER on 8-A)

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"JFK" revives bad memories in Dallas, Page 1-C. Arlen Specter disputes the movie's conclusions, Page 5-C.

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Film fires a bullet at Specter's

re-election campaign

SPECTER, from 1-A today and dismisses criticism of it as uninformed, mentioned in an interview last week of someday "owning" Time-Warner. Warner Bros. distributed the movie. Asked if he intended to sue for libel, Specter said: "No comment."

The movie comes at a time when Republican Specter faces re-election on a ticket headed by a Republican president whose popularity continues to crumble in the recession. It portrays the single-bullet theory as part and parcel of a massive, Washington-inspired cover-up at a time when the public is suspicious of Washington insiders.

And it comes on the heels of a nationally televised performance by Specter during the Thomas hearings that was widely criticized as insensitive to Anita Hill in particular and women in general — another "prosecution" by an ambitious counselor.

"I can't imagine this movie swaying large numbers of minds," said Todd Gitlin, a media analyst at the University of California at Berkeley. "But coming on top of a performance on the Judiciary Committee that many people viewed as brutal, I don't see how this could help."

Although many in the media have lambasted the movie as a travesty of history, Gitlin said, many moviegoers probably will not read the critiques, and the movie version is likely to become their reality. Numerous studies show that when people have no independent information on a subject, he said, "a mention in the media is more likely to be powerful, more likely to be remembered and more likely to be influential."

The movie-makers say they mentioned Specter's name not because of Anita Hill but because Specter played a central role in laying the foundation for the falsehoods that they say permeate the official Warren report.

The film "was in the can before the hearings" were televised in mid-October, said Zachary Sklar, who co-wrote the screenplay with director Oliver Stone. Another scene, in which an actor playing Specter questioned a witness, was cut because the film originally ran more than four hours.

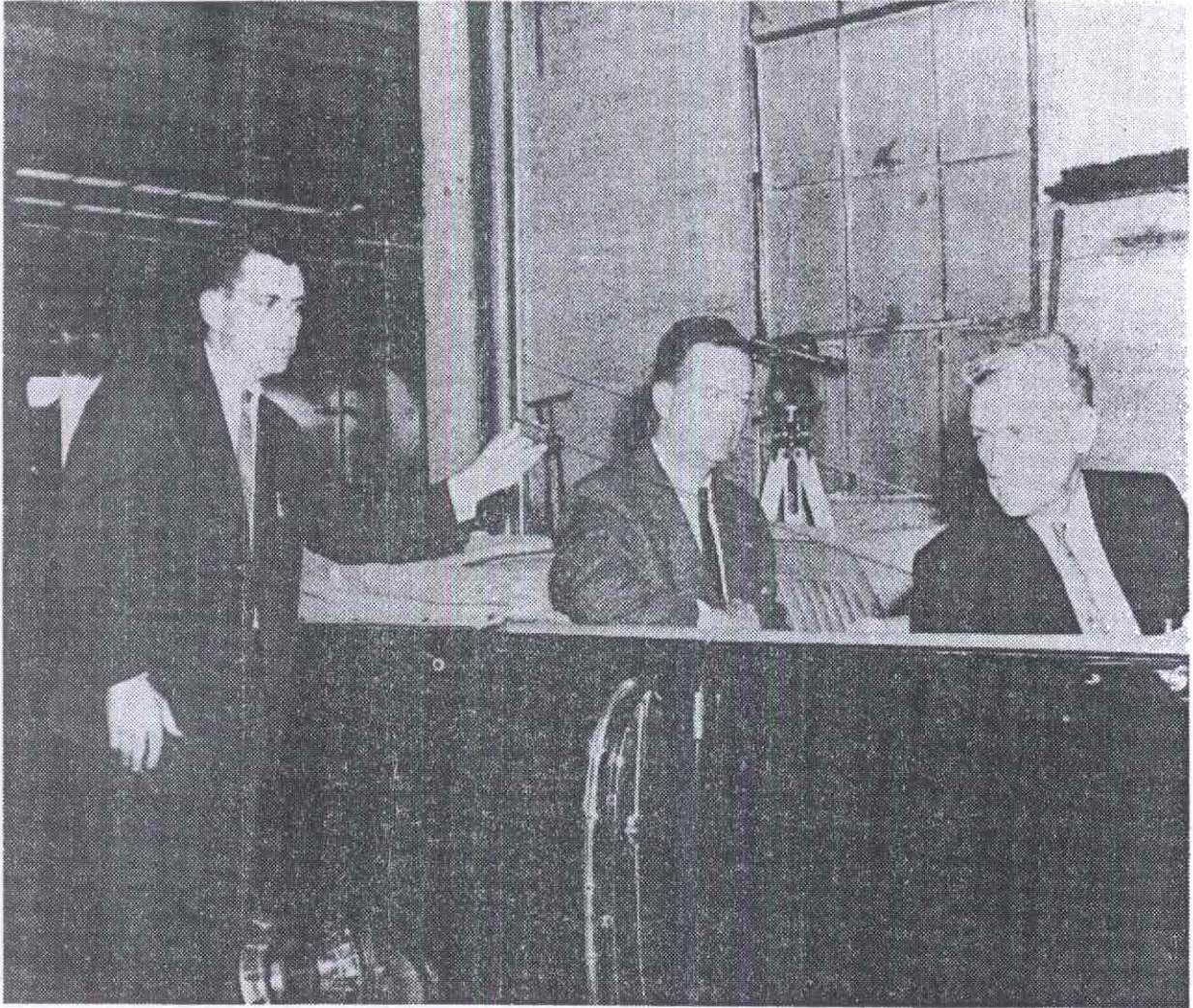
But Garrison's mention of Specter was not in the script until a late draft, said the film's research coordinator, Jane Rusconi.

As Costner gradually learned more about Specter's role, Rusconi said,

You MAY NOT WANT THIS ITEM BUT IT IS ANOTHER

SLANT. FROTHOD IS VERY CONSERVATIVE, STRONG

ANTI-ABORTION SO THIS REP. PRIMARY IS A NO WIN.



Warren Commission

During a 1964 re-enactment of the assassination, Specter (left) shows how a single bullet

might have wounded Kennedy and then traveled on to hit Connally.

the actor asked that his name be inserted in the movie. Until then, the line blamed only "an ambitious junior counselor" for the single-bullet theory.

"Kevin asked who the ambitious junior counselor was," Rusconi said, "and I told him. And he asked, 'What does he do now?' And I said he was a senator from Pennsylvania, and Kevin said, 'I want to say his name.'"

"When you're familiar with the material the way Kevin had become, and you know that the Warren Commission had no evidence and that someone dreams up this idea, you don't have the warmest of feelings for him."

But if Anita Hill was unknown to the movie-makers when they wrapped up filming, she and Specter

had become household names by the time the movie was released last month.

"People got to know the man [during the hearings] and saw how he operates," said Dennis Barnebey, 44, a Philadelphia teacher, who was among those jeering at the mention of Specter's name at a recent showing of *JFK* at the Andorra shopping center.

Barnebey, who said he would sit out this election, said it did not matter if some details of the movie were inaccurate. "Clearly," he said, "something else happened than what the Warren Commission determined. That's obvious."

Asked why she clapped at the mention of Specter's name, Sheila Laney, 38, a hospital worker from Philadel-

phia, said: "Anita Hill."

She said the movie was especially powerful for her because, as a black woman, she thought the police would not always protect her in a white neighborhood.

"This film makes white people feel that way — that you can't trust the authorities," she said.

In addition, she said, her grandparents were strong Kennedy supporters. "We had come through the lynchings," she said, "and Kennedy was a beacon for them. Then he was killed. They didn't believe that it was only [Lee Harvey] Oswald. They didn't get technical like this [movie], but they just didn't believe it. My grandmother would say, 'They killed him. They killed him.'"

A *Nova* documentary broadcast in

The movie portrays Specter's single-bullet theory as part of a massive cover-up. Specter maintains it is a valid explanation of what happened.

1988 on PBS concluded that the single-bullet theory was valid "despite its implausible aspects." Nonetheless, only 19 percent of the American public believes Oswald acted alone, according to a May survey by The Washington Post.

Specter said most people did not believe the theory because they had not read the 888-page Warren Commission report or examined the 17,000 pages in 25 volumes of supporting documentation. He noted, however, that the original commission members split 4-3 on whether to endorse the single-bullet theory.

Some, such as Robert Groden, an assassination analyst from Delaware County, contend that the evidence in the supporting volumes fails to support the commission's conclusions. He said eyewitness accounts and Kennedy's wounds confirm that a second gunman fired at the President from the front. Specter, who recreated the shooting in Dallas, said: "That is just plain untrue."

While highly critical of the movie, Specter added that it actually might help his re-election with some voters because "I had a key role in an important matter early in my career, and some people may find that impressive."

"But most voters are much more concerned with my proposals on things like getting the economy out of the recession or my pending legislation on extending health coverage," he said.

Specter's son, Shanin, an untitled campaign adviser, said voters were well-acquainted with his father. "They're not going to be fooled by a characterization of him in a movie," he said.

"If people believe Arlen Specter was behind a conspiracy to cover up the murderer of John Kennedy, then he wouldn't have been re-elected district attorney and not elected to the U.S. Senate or re-elected to the U.S. Senate. I don't believe Oliver Stone will change people's minds about Arlen Specter.

"Having said that, I recognize the

movie is technically, from a cinematic standpoint, a powerful film. I also regard it as a grotesque lie about many, many people in public life."

But will it become campaign fodder? Frank Mankiewicz, Robert F. Kennedy's campaign manager and now a public relations consultant hired to try to smooth the way for JFK, said it might.

"If there's anything about the movie that's convincing, it's that magic-bullet business," he said. "It's an absurd, silly, cockamamie theory. And if it becomes known as the Specter theory, I can see a candidate using it. Whatever vote or idea of Specter's on the economy comes along, all his opponent has to say is, 'It's another magic bullet. It won't work this time either.'"

Specter's opponent in the April GOP primary, State Rep. Stephen F. Freind, said he had not seen the movie and did not plan to use it in his campaign but trashed the single-bullet theory anyway.

"If you believe Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone," he said, "you believe in the tooth fairy. It adds up to a credibility issue. . . . There's this tremendous feeling of a cover-up, that we're not being leveled with."

Tony May, a Democrat and top political adviser to Gov. Casey, suggested that Specter's response to the movie would determine whether it hurt him.

"Was it the Watergate burglary itself, or the way Nixon responded to it, that brought down the presidency?" May asked. "Was it Willie Horton, or the way Dukakis refused to be engaged on the subject, that cost him the election? What is it that throws a candidate off his or her campaign plan and onto the defensive?"

The movie may put Specter on the defensive, said Marc Ross, a political scientist at Bryn Mawr College, "but it also puts him on the air. And Specter is articulate. He's good in those short sound bites." Ross dismissed the movie as "short-term noise."