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JFK

THE MOVIE

Oliver Stone Reshoots History
By Robert Sam Anson



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COVER: ZAPRUDER FILM STILL. © 1967, 1991 LMH COMPANY. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Esquire

The SHOOTING of JFK

In his controversial new film, Oliver Stone solves the most traumatic mystery of our era. Is he right? Does he care? Or is history just another Oliver Stone movie?

BY ROBERT SAM ANSON

What is history? Some people say it's a bunch of gossip made up by soldiers who passed it around a campfire. They say such and such happened. They create, they make it bigger, they make it better. I knew guys in combat who made up shit. I'm sure the cowboys did the same. The nature of human beings is that they exaggerate. So, what is history? Who the fuck knows? -OLIVER STONE

I

IN THE BAR OF THE WESTIN hotel in downtown New Orleans, just blocks from where the plot to kill the thirty-fifth president of the United States may or may not have been hatched, Oliver Stone is a little upset. Actually, more than a little upset. He is in the midst of a colossal rant, biting back at "the Doberman pinchers of the establishment," otherwise known as those members of the national press intent on "destroying" his still-aborning film, *JFK*.

"You should be fucking ashamed of yourself!" he shouts, face flushed, neck cords popping. "You call yourself journalists? You're caricatures of journalism!" Drained and sweaty from a tense day in the editing room, Stone is sucking on limes, throwing back shots of tequila. "It's not journalism you are doing! It's fucking propaganda. You are working for the Ministry of Information!" he went on, fortifying himself with a slug. "You have become Winston Smith! You have become George Orwell's creation! You could be a Russian working for Stalin in *Pravda* in 1935! You are liars! You just invent history! You should go back to school and learn honesty! That's where it starts! Honesty!"

Around the bar, drinks are frozen mid-sip. Everyone is staring at the bleary-eyed figure in blue jeans hurling abuse at tormentors none can see. Stone feels their gaze. He stops, flashes a gap-toothed grin, then does something that three-time Oscar-winners seldom do. He laughs at himself.

The moment is as rare as it is appealing. As his performance that jangly July afternoon demonstrated, being noisily raw-edged is Oliver Stone's trademark. He likes making incendiary statements (suggesting George Bush shoot himself, for a recent example), just as he likes making movies (*Salvador*, *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *The Doors*) that are

not so much entertainments as meat-axes to the cerebellum. "I have truth in the eyeball," the director who's been called the Wagner of Hollywood has said of his style. "If you guys don't see it because you have to be further back because it's punching you in the face, it's your problem. I can't change the way I see the world."

These, though, have been especially trying days, so unsettling that with only weeks until the scheduled December debut of arguably his most important film, Oliver Stone is more than normally on edge. He is about to offer up a solution to the most vexing mystery of modern times: the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Solve that riddle, Stone suggests, and you will discover why America plunged so irrevocably into Vietnam. It is a work no one has dared before and probably only Stone would. And without seeing a single frame of his movie, people have been saying the most terrible things.

He's been accused of distorting history and sully the memory of a martyred president; of recklessness and irresponsibility, mendacity and McCarthyism, paranoia and dementia—even of treason. His lengthening list of opponents, which unites foes who've been fighting

THE PLAYERS: EERIE ROLES IN...



KEVIN COSTNER AS JIM GARRISON



GARY OLDMAN AS LEE HARVEY OSWALD



DONALD SUTHERLAND AS MR. X

"There's an agenda here," he says of those who challenge him. "They're controlled in certain ways....Let's not be naive. . . . This controversy is meant to kill off the film, precensor it and maximize negative advance impact. . . . What this indicates is that they are scared. When it comes to President Kennedy's murder, they don't want to open the doors. They don't want the first inch of inquiry to go on."

SIX SECONDS in DALLAS

TO BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND this contention requires a primer, not in the ways of Hollywood, but in the murder of John Kennedy. The few, undisputed facts are these:

On November 22, 1963, at approximately 12:30 P.M., a convertible limousine bearing the president of the United States and his party entered an area in Dallas, Texas, known as Dealey Plaza. Riding in

over the Kennedy assassination for decades, have characterized him as a liar, a hypocrite, a megalomaniac, and a charlatan. It's been written that his morals are "repugnant," that there is nothing "too obscene, too indecent, too unethical" that he would not do to "exploit and commercialize a great national tragedy." He has been charged by otherwise-sober folk with defamation of character, poisoning young minds, and undermining confidence in American institutions. Some have ridiculed his film ("Dances with Facts"); others have recommended that it be boycotted.

This has not stopped Oliver Stone. Giving as good as he's gotten, he's branded one critic a CIA agent, accused another of theft, and ventured the view that a vast, powerful plot is working hammer and tongs against him. He's cited Aristotle, Pontius Pilate, and Allen Dulles in defending his film, and likened himself to figures ranging from Orson Welles to William Shakespeare. Along the way, he has also charged past and present elements of his own government with conspiracy, murder, obstruction of justice, and aiding and abetting a felony before and after the fact—not to mention maintaining a laboratory in suburban Maryland where ex-Nazi scientists devise lethal cancer serums to silence bothersome opponents. Mostly, though, Oliver Stone has been plain angry.

the front seat were two secret-service agents; immediately behind them, in jump seats, were Texas governor John Connally and his wife, Nellie. The limo's rearmost seat was occupied by forty-six-year-old John Kennedy and his wife, Jacqueline.

At the base of a seven-story red-brick building called the Texas School Book Depository, the limousine made a hard, oblique left and began heading toward the shelter of a railway overpass two hundred yards distant. Several seconds later, just as the car entered the viewfinder of an 8-mm home-movie camera owned by a dress manufacturer named Abraham Zapruder, there was the sound of rifle fire.

An initial shot struck Kennedy, nicked his tie knot and caused him to lean forward and bring his hands up to his throat. Then Connally was hit, a bullet smashing into his back and through his chest and wrist before embedding itself in his left thigh. Another round went wide of the mark, striking the roadway and sending a shard of concrete into the cheek of a bystander. Then, with the still slowly moving limousine only yards from the base of a verdant rise topped by a six-foot picket fence, the president was hit again with explosive force by a round that blasted away the right side of his head and hurled him violently backward at a rate later calculated at one hundred feet per second.

Within moments of the shooting, police fanned out over the area. Most ran up the rise, which came to be called "the grassy knoll." Others entered the Book Depository, where in the second floor lunchroom, an officer came upon a newly hired stock boy drinking a Coke. A twenty-four-year-old ex-Marine who had once defected to the Soviet Union and had spent that summer in New Orleans, propagandizing on behalf of Fidel Castro, his name was Lee Harvey Oswald. The cop stuck his revolver in Oswald's stomach, then, when told he was an employee, continued up to the sixth floor, where witnesses had reported seeing a rifleman in one of the windows. Concealed behind some boxes of textbooks, a World War II-vintage Italian army rifle was found. Whoever had been firing it had vanished.

At 1:15 P.M., fifteen minutes after the president was pronounced dead at Parkland Hospital, J. D. Tippit, a Dallas police officer, was shot to death on a sidewalk several miles from Dealey Plaza. Details of his killing were still coming in when a caller informed police that a man had rushed into a movie theater without paying, eight blocks from the Tippit murder. Teams of police and FBI agents immediate-

...AMERICA'S MOST MYSTERIOUS PLOT



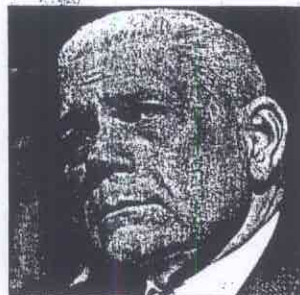
JOE PESCI AS DAVID FERRIE



TOMMY LEE JONES AS CLAY SHAW



JIM GARRISON AS EARL WARREN



ly converged on the scene. There, after a brief struggle and a shout from one of the officers—"Kill the President, will you?!"—Lee Harvey Oswald was arrested.

During twenty-three hours of interrogation, Oswald never wavered in his protestations of innocence. "I'm just a patsy," he told reporters. "I didn't shoot anybody, no sir." Whether the state could prove the contrary was never determined. Two days after the assassination, as Oswald was being transferred to the county jail, he was shot to death before a national television audience in the basement of the Dallas police department. His assailant was Jack Ruby, a local strip-joint operator.

Such were the bare-bone facts of the assassination and its aftermath. To flesh them out and quell rumors that his predecessor had been the victim of a conspiracy, Lyndon Johnson appointed a blue-ribbon investigation panel headed by Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren. Following ten months of hearings and what was said to be the most exhaustive investigation in FBI history, the Warren Commission issued its central finding: Acting alone, Lee Harvey Oswald had, indeed, slain the president of the United States, as well as Officer Tippit. The accused assassin's apparent motive: a deranged desire to make a name for himself.

The Warren Report was barely in print before a mixed bag of scholars, skeptics, and special-pleaders—assassination buffs, they were tagged—began to dismantle its contentions one by one. The buffs cast doubt on nearly everything, from Oswald's marksmanship (as a Marine, he'd barely qualified for the lowest level of competency) to the accuracy of his supposed weapon (bought for \$21.45 through mail order, the rifle was misfitted with a telescopic sight and used ammunition last manufactured in 1944) to the direction from which the fatal head shot had been fired (two thirds of the witnesses placed it as coming from the grassy knoll—in front of Kennedy—while the Commission insisted it had come from the Book Depository to the rear, a claim seemingly contradicted by the Zapruder film and Newtonian laws of motion).

The buffs' most withering scorn, though, was for the Commission's finding that Kennedy and Connally had both been wounded by the first shot fired. The claim was crucial to the single-assassination thesis, for in the hands of an expert marksman working the bolt-action rifle *without* aiming, the Mannlicher-Carcano could be fired no

faster than once every 2.3 seconds. The Zapruder film showed Connally reacting to being wounded no later than 1.6 seconds after Kennedy. That the Texas governor was hit so quickly after the first shot suggested a second shot, hence a second gunman.

To solve this conundrum, the Commission developed what came to be called the Magic Bullet Theory. Named after a round that had been recovered from a stretcher at Parkland, this bullet, according to the Commission, struck the president in the back, exited his throat, and went on from there to wound Connally five times, shattering two of his bones in the process. There were numerous problems with the theory, none more grievous than the condition of the Magic Bullet itself. Virtually pristine, it had lost but .65 percent of its original weight—about what could be expected after being fired through water. When the FBI attempted to duplicate the results by firing identical rounds into both human and goat cadavers, all the test bullets were left grossly deformed.

The more the critics probed, the more holes they found. All that was missing, according to polls showing the overwhelming majority of Americans still disbelieving the explanation provided by their government, were the answers to two questions: Who? and Why?

The SEDUCTION of OLIVER STONE

THE COMING OF OLIVER Stone to the movie that would purport to answer those queries was slow and reluctant.

As a seventeen-year-old prep-school senior, he'd been shocked by the killing ("The world stopped; it stunned me that a young, handsome president could be killed like that"), but his reaction was no greater than that of most Americans. With his mind on other things—a brief try at Yale, a romantic voyage to Southeast Asia, enlistment in the Army—he was likewise only vaguely aware of the fire storm that followed the Warren Report's release. Not that knowledge at that point would have made much difference. He was a conservatively raised "Goldwater-Republican boy," inclined to accept

THE DIRECTOR: TRUTH IN THE EYEBALL?



OLIVER STONE IN THE SHADOW OF THE SCHOOL BOOK DEPOSITORY BUILDING: CAN A FILM CHANGE HISTORY?

what his government told him. Thus, Stone had no interest when, in late February 1967, a man who would one day play a major role in his life and in his art stepped before a bank of microphones to make a startling announcement. He had found the answers. He had solved the case.

The man was Jim Garrison, then the district attorney of New Orleans, and the only official, before or since, to bring criminal charges in the murder of John Kennedy. The move won him adoration by many, and, when his case ended in shambles two years later, vilification by many more. Stone had no opinion one way or the other. At the time, he had more immediate worries, like staying alive in Vietnam. He survived, but as a different person. "I said, 'Let's get some fucking rifles and go up on rooftops. Let's go for Nixon,'" Stone would recount of his return home in 1968 as a twice-wounded, deeply radicalized vet. "Going to the dark side, you really see the underside of life. Like Lee Harvey Oswald. I was in that world. I know that world. I know those people."

The rage accompanied him to film school, where Stone learned his craft under Martin Scorsese, who would later embark on a film about a fictional assassin, *Taxi Driver*. To some, Stone seemed as intimidating as his mentor's Travis Bickle. "You had the

sense that he was obsessed about getting to what he thought was the truth of things," says a friend from those days. "He gave you the impression that he would do anything—take drugs, commit murder, anything—in order to get to the truth."

One of those truths, Stone decided by the time he was writing his Oscar-winning script for *Midnight Express*, was that the Kennedy assassination had turned the American universe upside down. Before the killing, he believed, all had been right; after it, all wrong. But for Stone, the most profound and personal consequence of Kennedy's death was the war in which he'd served. "If Kennedy had been in office," Stone says flatly, "Vietnam would not have happened." Till recently, though, Stone had no interest in how the killing itself had come about. "I thought that people like Mark Lane were crazy," he says. "I thought Lee Oswald had shot the president."

What changed his mind was a book that was sent to him in the summer of 1988, when he was filming portions of *Born on the Fourth of July*. The book was *On the Trail of the Assassins*; its author was Jim Garrison, the D.A. whose announcement had stunned the nation twenty-

one year before. Three readings and a meeting with the author later, Stone was hooked. "Jim Garrison," he said, "opened my eyes."

Garrison often had that effect on people. A six-foot-six war hero of musical voice and boundless charm, he was hard to resist and the book he'd written hard to put down. In gripping prose, it laid out the story of his most famous criminal case, the prosecution of a retired New Orleans businessman, Clay Shaw, for conspiracy in the murder of John Kennedy. The tale, as Garrison related it, was of a lonely but determined crusader battling overwhelming odds in the interest of truth and the American way—a narrative not unlike a typical Oliver Stone film. But where Stone's enemies numbered stingy studios and critics such as Pauline Kael, Garrison's included the CIA, the "brainwashing establishment media," assorted state governors, Cuban hitmen, the Department of Justice, the Kennedy family, and Lyndon Baines Johnson. All had conspired to frustrate a probe that had its beginnings in a drunken, assassination-night brawl between a dipsomaniacal private detective, Jack Martin, and his sometime employer, Guy Banister, an ex-FBI man, extreme rightist, and suspected acquaintance of Lee Harvey Oswald. From there, the trail had led to a flamboyantly eccentric pilot, homosexual, and Banister associate named David Ferrie whose character (self-taught cancer researcher, self-ordained bishop, self-proclaimed killer of Cuban communists) and appearance (totally hairless, he penciled in eyebrows with greasepaint and wore a toupee so bad that it literally looked like a rug) made him impossible to forget. He, too, was a well-known Kennedy hater and rumored Oswald friend, and perhaps also, Garrison had been tipped, the getaway pilot for the cabal. But before the net could close, both Banister and Ferrie died, the former leaving sheaves of Oswald's pro-Cuba leaflets in his desk, the latter under most suspicious circumstances. Heedless of threats, Garrison had pressed on and at last found the conspiracy's mastermind: a widely beloved aesthete who, under what the D.A. deduced was CIA cover, was then engaged in nothing more shadowy than writing a play about New Orleans's first Spanish governor. At that point Garrison's enemies stepped in, so undermining the investigation that, in the end, Shaw went free and the truth was lost.

Such was the plot of *On the Trail of the Assassins*, and Oliver Stone was captivated. "It read like a Dashiell Hammett whodunit," he said later. "It starts out as a bit of a seedy crime with small traces, and then the gumshoe district attorney follows the trail, and the trail widens and widens, and before you know it, it's no longer a small-town affair. That seemed to me the kernel of a very powerful movie."

He was no less attracted to Garrison as the pivot on which the film would turn. The D.A., Stone said, was "somewhat like a Jimmy Stewart character in an old Capra movie—someone who undertakes to investigate something that has been covered up. He makes many mistakes. He has many frustrations. He has few successes. He is ridiculed, and the case he brings to trial crashes."

Later, director Stone would discover that there were certain facts that author Garrison had left out. His separation from the Army, for instance, which had come about following diagnosis that he was in need of long-term psychotherapy. Or his close association with organized crime, whose soldiers and capos he rarely prosecuted, and who returned the favor by picking up his Las Vegas expenses and selling him a house cut-rate. Or the bribery and income-tax-evasion trials in which he was exonerated. There were many such omissions in Jim Garrison's book, not least how his pursuit of Clay Shaw was, in many minds, one of the most grotesque chapters in American legal history.

The books and articles Oliver Stone would eventually read chronicled this grotesquerie, macabre incident by macabre incident. They told of testimony gained via truth serum and hypnosis; of

The SHOOTING of JFK

"witnesses" who came forward following bribery, promise, and threat; of evidence manufactured, facts twisted, suspects—including one identified as a CIA man because he worked in a hotel a few miles from the agency's headquarters—snatched from the prosecutor's imagination. Mostly, though, these pages that

Oliver Stone would later absorb told of Jim Garrison, who proclaimed, "There is no truth, there is only what the jury decides"; who hypothesized fourteen different groups of separately motivated plotters—homosexuals, White Russians, Dallas police, Cuban exiles, "the invisible Nazi substructure," before settling on the CIA and the military-industrial complex; who saw gunmen everywhere in Dealey Plaza, including in the sewers. In damning detail, they described the innocents he destroyed (including Shaw, who was left shattered by the experience and died soon after); the boasts he made of knowing the assassins, each and every one. They related as well the conclusion of his paranoid charade: a verdict of not guilty by a jury out less than an hour.

All this would in time be revealed to Oliver Stone; it did not shift his opinion. "I feel I gotta go back to those movies I believe in," he said in a speech a few months before paying Garrison \$250,000 for the rights to his book, "where my hero is facing certain extinction, surrounded on all sides by enemy swordsmen, but, by some shining light of inner force and greater love, turns the tables of fate and triumphs over all odds."

Oliver Stone had found that hero. Now all he had to do was make the movie.

STARTS, FITS, and CON JOBS

S

TONE'S HABIT WAS

to never finish one job before starting another. So it was with JFK. With *Born on the Fourth of July* still filming, he began immersing himself in the assassination, paying particular attention to works arguing that Oswald, far from being the unbalanced loner of the Warren Report, enjoyed extensive ties to U.S. intelligence. The spook proponents made a persuasive case. From his service in the Marine Corps (which assigned him to a secret CIA air base as a radar operator) to his 1959 "defection" to the Soviet Union (where he threatened to commit espionage and married the niece of a colonel in the Soviet MVD) to his return to Texas in 1962 (unquestioned by the CIA, which at the time was grilling tourists coming home from Yugoslavia) to the summer he spent in New Orleans before the assassination (promoting Castro one day, offering to train his enemies in guerrilla warfare the next), there were dozens of strange occurrences in Oswald's life that appeared to bear some intelligence agency's fingerprints.

According to declassified transcripts of their deliberations, the members of the Warren Commission had also been deeply suspicious of Oswald's background—his odd travels, his inexplicable financing, his facility in speaking Russian, his ability to elude surveillance devices, his ownership of a Minox camera, on and on—and suspicious as well (correctly, as it turned out) that both the CIA and FBI were concealing vital evidence. But nothing had come of their worries. Instead, they had trusted in the assurances of their fellow Commission member, Allen Dulles, who'd been fired as CIA director by John Kennedy.

More by intuition than investigation, Garrison too had contended that spies were mixed up in the Kennedy killing, and since the Shaw trial, information had emerged suggesting that he was right. Declassified CIA documents confirm that Shaw had, in fact, been an informant for the agency's "domestic contact service," while

the Church Committee and the Rockefeller Commission had revealed that assassination, if only of foreign leaders, had been a recurring topic of executive-suite chitchat at Langley. Despite Shaw's sworn denials, there also seemed to be reasonably good evidence that he had known Ferrie, possibly even Oswald. That, at any rate, was the hedged conclusion in 1979 of the House Select Committee on Assassinations. Relying on a subsequently disputed dictabelt recording of four shots in Dealey Plaza, the last coming from the grassy knoll, the Committee also concluded that there was a "95 percent probability" that the president had been a victim of a conspiracy—just as Jim Garrison had claimed.

Seasoned assassination buffs had known these things for years, but the knowledge had not ameliorated their low regard for now-Appellate Judge Garrison. Lacking their experience, Stone was like a conspiracy Rip Van Winkle awakening to a nightmare. His discoveries left him more convinced than ever of Garrison's rightness, but also convinced that, as a dramatic character, Garrison was badly in need of freshening. For Stone's contemplated film to be credibly up-to-date, Garrison had to be transformed from an historic individual to an artistic metaphor, a metaphor that would be shown in *JFK* uncovering facts that diligent others had only discovered a decade or two down the road. It required optioning a more current book and engaging as a screenwriting partner someone with knowledge not only of Garrison's case but of later conspiracy developments as well. Stone's selections were, respectively, Texas journalist Jim Marrs's *Crossfire*, a Baedeker's guide to assassination theories, and Garrison's literary editor, New Yorker Zachary Sklar.

With the preliminary housekeeping out of the way, Stone commenced work on yet another movie, *The Doors*. But, per usual, he continued thinking of his next project, deciding that the time had arrived to find financing for *JFK*; with the elaborate, star-studded movie he envisioned, he would need millions more in financing than he had ever required before. The need led him to Warner Bros., which, ignoring Stone's recent public description of the studio as one of the industry's "cocksucker vampires," had been trying to lure him to do a picture about Howard Hughes. "If you're really serious about doing something about corruption," Stone said to Warners president Terry Semel during a meeting that put the Hughes idea to rest, "the biggest corruption of all is the Kennedy murder."

Semel's eyes widened as Stone sketched his idea. *JFK*, he said, would tell not one tale but three: Garrison's, Oswald's, and the real story of America's entrance into Vietnam. "I'm not interested in pinning the murder on specific individuals," he said. "I'm interested in the whydunit as opposed to the whodunit. I think if you understand the why, then you begin to understand the who, and the who is much larger than we think." Cinematically, he would get that theme across by making of *JFK* what Kurosawa had made of *Rashomon*: a kaleidoscope of possible realities, with the audience left to select which among them was the actual truth. "If the movie is cut the way I think it is going to be cut," Stone said, "I think you will leave the theater ready to think about things and, I hope, rethink them, and begin to wonder about some of the givens, some of the sacred cows, some of the official story. Because that's what I think the Warren Commission is. It is America's official story." Wowed, Semel committed Warners for \$40 million.

In New York, meanwhile, Sklar continued to work on the script. He'd write a few scenes and send them to California, where Stone would make corrections and additions and send them back. They argued a few times, reportedly over the demeaning shift Stone gave female characters (an old complaint with the director) and his lurid handling of Shaw's homosexuality. In life, Shaw had been the soul of refined dignity, with exquisite tastes in literature, music, and

The SHOOTING of JFK

Restoration-style architecture. In Stone's depiction, he grabbed obscenely after boys in a residence done up in early dungeon. As he had in his other "fact-based" films, *Born on the Fourth of July* and *The Doors*, Stone, who publicly condemned other directors for "distorting reality," was also transposing scenes, inventing characters, and creating situations, invariably strengthening the case for conspiracy. One such instance showed Ferrie being murdered by two assailants who stuffed pills down his throat; and indeed, contusions suggesting just that were found in Ferrie's mouth. According to the coroner, however, he'd died of a cerebral hemorrhage. According to Garrison, whose men had found two unsigned suicide notes at the scene, he'd killed himself. In Stone's script, Jack Ruby, who died of pancreatic cancer in 1967, suffered an even grislier demise. Shown begging Earl Warren to be taken back to Washington so that he might fully testify (true), and expressing fears for his life if he remained in Dallas (also true), Ruby, according to Stone's script, was finally shut up via lethal injection (not true at all).

Later, after the press began pillorying him for such scenes, Stone would defend himself by saying that even though *JFK* was "not a true story per se," all of its points had been researched and documented. He'd also cite the *Rashomon* analogy, telling a reporter he was "exploring all possible scenarios of who killed Kennedy and why." To alert the audience to the more fanciful of those explorations, he would sepia-tone the scene. "I feel I've behaved responsibly," he'd say. "I've done all my homework."

Stone had done his homework, at least up to a point. But because he'd come to the Kennedy case so late, he was uninformed about the bitter rivalries that had grown among the buffs, an ignorance that on more than one occasion alienated researchers who might have helped him. Those he did talk to found him inquisitive and open-minded, except on the subject of Garrison. "I looked Jim straight in the eye and asked him about it," he told a reporter who inquired about Garrison's links to New Orleans mob boss Carlos Marcello, who had made specific threats on Kennedy's life. "And Jim told me he'd only met him two brief times on social occasions. I believe him."

Whom else he believed was problematic for the script, as Stone seemed highly susceptible to sources serious scholars had dismissed years before. A leading case in point was Beverly Oliver, a nightclub singer turned born-again Christian and assassination buff. Among Oliver's many claims—which she had waited seven years after November 22, 1963, to make—was that she had seen Ferrie in Ruby's nightclub; been at Dealey Plaza during the assassination; taken crucial footage of the killing; had that film confiscated by the FBI and CIA; and with her mobster husband met in a Miami hotel room with Richard Nixon. So many and so startling were her supposed involvements that one leading Commission critic dubbed her "an assassination buff's wet dream." Stone, though, found her story quite believable and included a Beverly Oliver character in the script.

He had less patience with those who equivocated, such as Gus Russo, a well-regarded researcher who'd been pursuing the case for two decades. Invited to brief Stone, Russo was told that if he "impressed" him, a lucrative consulting contract might be in the offing. The meeting did not go well. Remembers Russo: "I said to him, 'We don't have all the answers. We only have half of them. Here's what we know, here's what we don't know. But even if you go with the half we do know, it'll still make for a helluva movie.' Well, Oliver didn't like that one bit. He said, 'I don't want half stories. I want the answers and I'm gonna get them.' So I said to him, 'Good luck. If you can brainstorm in six months what a hundred of us have not been able to get in twenty years, I'll be the first to shake your hand.'"

Russo was just out the door when a fax arrived, promising everything Stone had been seeking—not only the identity of the assass-

sin, but sixteen other items, from what was described as "the actual rifle that inflicted the fatal head shot" to the identity of "the person who eliminated key witnesses" to "the code names of the other gunmen involved" to "a picture of the assassin's wife and Jack Ruby together." The last item was the capper: "A letter to the assassin congratulating him on a job well done from a former president of the United States."

The source of this cornucopia was Larry Howard, a former Texas contractor who'd founded the JFK Assassination Information Center, in Dallas. Termed the P. T. Barnum of the conspiracy by one buff, Howard liked to boast that he'd never read a book on the Kennedy killing, and other buffs say that he'd become involved in assassinology strictly for the money. The conclusion of his fax to Stone was just as unvarnished. "We have uncovered the real truth behind the assassination," Howard proclaimed. "JFK was murdered by the real people who control the power base in the U.S. In their minds, he was a threat to national security and had to be eliminated."

By the time Howard's message arrived, virtually all his claims had been, or were about to be, demolished. Undaunted—or, as one buff speculated, "in way over his head and desperate for a story"—Stone nonetheless paid Howard's research center \$80,000.

Following the purchase, a number of the more respected buffs found it hard to get through to Stone. "Once Oliver met Howard, the rest of us were cut off," said one who had briefly dealt with Stone and was suddenly frozen out. "Oliver had his story. He thought he had nailed it. He's so sure of himself, so arrogant and cocky. But that happens, I guess, after you win a few Oscars."

Stone, though, did not lack for companionship. Besides Howard, who was constantly at his elbow in Dallas, he was being besieged by promoters offering unique solutions to the case (photographs supposedly showing Kennedy being shot by his driver), novel interpretations of intended victims (Jackie, not Jack, had been the actual target), and, in the person of one ex-CIA man who invited him to invest in a Mideast gun-running deal, opportunities to quintuple JFK's budget. There were more serious visitors too, including autopsy and ballistics experts, photographic analysts, theorists of every ideological shade and description. The one Stone heard out most intently was a former Air Force colonel named L. Fletcher Prouty.

An aide to the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Kennedy years, Prouty since his retirement had become a quirky critic of the CIA, sometimes in books (*The Secret Team: The CIA and Its Allies in Control of the United States and the World*), more often in the pages of *Gallery*, one of the raunchier porno magazines. It was the colonel's theorizing about the assassination, however, that made him indispensable to Stone.

According to Prouty, Kennedy had been the victim of a military-industrial-complex plot triggered by his plan to withdraw from Vietnam. The intention had long been bruited by Kennedy partisans, but Prouty had come up with a number of declassified documents to buttress the claim. The most important was a top-secret National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM 263) drafted only six weeks before the assassination. In it, Kennedy formally endorsed a recommendation that one thousand U.S. advisers be pulled out by the end of 1963, with a complete withdrawal of advisers to follow no later than the conclusion of 1965. Once NSAM 263 was signed, said Prouty, Kennedy was, for all intents, a dead man. As Prouty put it: "You could see changes in the civilians who came [into the Pentagon] from the companies and the officers who work in the companies. You never heard people talking about 'President Kennedy' anymore. It was 'that goddamn Kennedy.' Vietnam for them represented the potential of tens of billions of dollars. They could see what he was doing and that he was going to get away with it. This is what caused him to be murdered."

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To cinch his case, Prouty produced another top-secret NSAM, approved by Lyndon Johnson four days after Kennedy's murder. Missing from this document was any mention of withdrawal of U.S. military personnel. Instead, it presented a forthright plan for escalation, including preparations for attacking North

Vietnam (bombing would indeed follow seven months later) and employing U.S. combat troops to invade Laos up to a distance of fifty kilometers. "I think Johnson was scared to death," said Prouty, explaining the policy reversal. "When you put a guy like Lyndon Johnson in a car behind the president and shoot the bullets right over his head, there's only one thing old Lyndon thinks about, and that's *The bastards are shooting at me*. From that time, Lyndon was in the bag."

Prouty was not the first to argue the Vietnam-as-motive scenario (Garrison, among others, had subscribed to it, following the Shaw trial), but his résumé, which according to the colonel included clandestine skulduggery stretching from Romania to Indonesia, lent his hypothesis a sheen of extra credibility. Prouty, however, was not without fault. Like Stone, he had a tendency to see the CIA's dark hand everywhere. "If you had a thought in the shower," said a Stone associate, with only mild exaggeration, "Fletcher would say the CIA was responsible." Another liability was Prouty's fondness for putting himself at the center of great events, such as the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, where he claimed to have personally seen ships christened *Barbara* (as in future First Lady Bush) and *Houston* (after the future President's adopted hometown).

The more cautious buffs were leery of Prouty, whose role with the joint chiefs changed from by-line to by-line, and warier still of some of his claims, such as his suggestion that he'd been dispatched on a mission to the South Pole in November 1963, so that last-minute plotting might go on without his detection. Stone, however, embraced him without reservation. Delighted to discover a beribboned source with views he'd come to only by instinct, he signed Prouty on as a technical adviser and rejiggered the script to include a Prouty-like character (Mr. X) who reveals to Garrison the full dimensions of the conspiracy. "It was a military-style ambush from start to finish," Stone's script had Garrison telling his staff following his first meeting with Mr. X, "a coup d'état with Lyndon Johnson waiting in the wings."

FILMING and FIRE STORM

AS THE FALL OF 1990 approached, Oliver Stone was behaving more and more like a spook himself. At Stone's Camelot Productions, where *JFK* was referred to only as *Project X*, employees were required to sign a secrecy agreement, and numbered drafts of the script were kept under lock and key. Let more serious snoops discover what he was up to, Stone also had the premises swept for bugs. Then he engaged in some machinations of his own.

The target was Don DeLillo's *Libra*, a critically acclaimed, best-selling novel about Oswald that had been optioned by A&M Films. With Phil Joanou (*State of Grace*) signed to direct a far simpler script than Stone's, it seemed likely that *Libra* would be in the theaters long before *JFK*. But all at once, odd things began happening. Actors who'd seemed ready to sign with *Libra* suddenly changed their minds, reportedly after receiving calls from Stone's agency, Mike Ovitz's powerful Creative Artists Agency, cautioning about questionable career moves. Joanou himself bailed out, after getting the same message, along with, sources say, a call from Stone, who told him,

"My film's more cinematic than yours." Desperate to salvage the project, the producers of *Libra* temporarily shelved plans for theatrical release and began negotiating with Time-Warner-owned HBO to release the movie on first-run cable. That too was scuttled.

Stone disclaimed any involvement in *Libra*'s problems, but not everyone in Hollywood believed him. "You don't get any more powerful in this town as a filmmaker than he is," said a screenwriter friend of Stone's. "When he says, 'I am not going to be happy about a competing project,' well, he doesn't have to say anything more."

Finding the right lead to play Garrison, however, proved trickier. Stone's first choice was Harrison Ford, but he was taking an extended vacation. His next nominee was Mel Gibson, but after a strained dinner meeting, Gibson passed as well. Finally, Stone sent the script to Kevin Costner, fresh from his triumph in *Dances with Wolves*. He seemed a weird choice. Where Garrison was the raucously outsized embodiment of the Big Easy's *le bon temps roulet*, the monotonous, monorange Costner was a slight, tight goody-two-shoes. Stone, however, liked what he termed Costner's Americanness, a quality he deemed perfect for a story that would be "Capraesque." Without troubling to check the accuracy of the lines he'd be speaking ("Kevin's not particularly interested in history or politics," explained a friend), Costner assented, and a deal was struck: \$7 million, plus a percentage of receipts.

Warners, which had wanted star power to enhance *JFK*'s allure, regarded Costner's fee a bargain. However, the studio was deeply worried about Stone's script. It was bogglingly complex, with 212 speaking parts, more than 1,000 camera setups, 95 scenes, 15 separate film stocks, and endless intercuts and flashbacks—"everything but footnotes," Stone joked. More alarming to Warners, the story at its initial length threatened to surpass four hours in screen time. "It'll shrink on camera," Stone promised Semel, who was pressing for the elimination of a number of scenes. When Semel seemed skeptical, Stone shrugged, "Maybe you should get Robert Towne to come in and rewrite this, because I don't know what to take out." "Aw, fuck," Semel groaned at the mention of the notoriously slow-working Oscar winner. "That'll take two years." The men laughed, and the scenes stayed. Warners, though, took one precaution. To test the marketability of the movie, it hired the Gallup organization to conduct a poll. When asked whether they had "positive interest" in seeing an Oliver Stone film on the assassination, nearly 70 percent of respondents between the ages of eighteen and fifty-four answered yes. When the same question was put to those fifty-five and older, nearly half said no.

The curtain of secrecy that had shrouded *JFK* finally lifted—if only for a peek—late last February. In an interview with the industry trade paper *Variety*, Stone confirmed growing rumors that he was about to commence shooting a film on the assassination and declared that *JFK* would "prove" that Lee Harvey Oswald had not killed John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Vague on how he'd go about that, as well as the precise story his movie would tell, Stone said that in the interest of entertainment, he was taking some creative liberties, but not many. "I can't take too much," said Stone, "because the material is very important and sacred to the public." He then added solemnly: "John Kennedy was the godfather of my generation. . . . Like Hamlet, we have to try and look back and correct the inaccuracies."

Six weeks later, shooting began in Dealey Plaza, where after a prolonged battle and the payment of \$50,000, Stone had secured rights to film on the Book Depository's famous sixth floor. The preparations to restore the building to its condition on November 22, 1963, had been elaborate: A wing that had been removed since was rebuilt, window frames repainted their original color, a floor restocked with three thousand identical book cartons, the trees outside trimmed to

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their height twenty-eight years before.

At last, there was a cry of "action!" As some of the eleven thousand who had turned out for Stone's extras call began to cheer and applaud, a black convertible Lincoln limousine bearing a stand-in president of the United States and his party began gliding to another appointment in Dallas. And, once again, there was the sound of rifle fire. "Cut!" someone yelled. "There's not enough smoke coming from the grassy knoll."

It was not all make-believe death in Dallas. There was also time for interviews ("I consider myself a person who's taking history and shaping it in a certain way," Stone told a reporter. "Like Shakespeare shaped *Henry V*"); firsthand investigation ("Impossible shot," judged the director after trying to crawl into Garrison's storm sewers); hijinks (a birthday party for the production's research coordinator where the guests wore David Ferrie masks); last-minute research (a chat with LBJ mistress Madeleine Brown, who reportedly quoted her lover as saying on November 21, "After tomorrow, I won't have to worry about those Kennedy boys anymore"); embarrassments (watching an enfeebled Garrison, playing the part of Earl Warren, go through seventeen takes); even visits with Oswald's widow, Marina, who said of Stone, "When he leaves, he takes the air in the room with him."

The goings-on did not amuse everyone. Particularly unhappy were the buffs, who, having had their credibility battered once by Garrison, were nervous that it would be clobbered again by what one critic called "this \$40 million gorilla." None were more vociferous on the subject than seventy-eight-year-old Harold Weisberg, the dean of the assassination researchers. "You have every right to play Mack Sennett in a Keystone Kops Pink Panther," he wrote Stone, "but as an investigator, Jim Garrison could not find a public hair in a warehouse at rush hour."

When no satisfactory response was forthcoming, Weisberg secured an early draft of the *JFK* script ("theft," Stone called it), and dispatched it to George Lardner, who had covered the Garrison investigation for *The Washington Post*. The result that greeted the production when it reached New Orleans was a lengthy feature article headlined DALLAS IN WONDERLAND: OLIVER STONE'S VERSION OF THE KENNEDY ASSASSINATION EXPLOITS THE EDGE OF PARANOIA. Accompanied by a cartoon showing a grinning Stone leering into a limousine where Kennedy was having makeup applied, Lardner's story eviscerated both Garrison's investigation ("a farce" and "a fraud") and the ongoing production ("Is this the Kennedy assassination or the 'Charge of the Light Brigade?'"). But the most barbed bon mot came from Weisberg, who said of Stone, "I think people who sell sex have more principle."

Like the first rock in a landslide, Lardner's brickbat unleashed a cascade of press invective. In the *Chicago Tribune*, columnist Jon Margolis opined that by making a movie centered on Garrison, Stone was beyond morally repugnant. Unconcerned that one corporate sibling, Warner Bros., was bankrolling Stone, and that another, Warner Books, was paying Garrison \$137,500 for his paperback rights, *Time* chimed in with a critique of its own. By attaching himself to "the far-out fringe of conspiracy theorists," the weekly news-magazine intoned, "film-dom's most flamboyant interpreter of the 1960s . . . may wind up doing more harm than homage to the memory of the fallen president."

Furious, Stone fired off stiff rejoinders to *Time* and the *Post*. Then, after getting into a shouting match with Ben Bradlee ("Jason Robards played that guy?" said Stone of the newspaper's executive editor. "It should have been Rod Steiger"), he let loose in an interview with the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, lambasting the press for being "fucking asleep for twenty-eight years" and labeling Lardner "a CIA agent-journalist." Lardner considered suing for libel, but settled for a complete retraction. In the future, the [continued on page 174]

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[continued from page 102] reporter advised, "the little scumbag" should "shut up."

Stone, however, had been right about one thing: Save for a handful of inconsequential exceptions, the press had, indeed, been dozing since November 22, 1963.

There were good, nonconspiratorial reasons for the media's long slumber, not least of them the Garrison trial, which featured the indictment of several reporters on charges ranging from bribery to obstruction of justice. The facts of the Kennedy murder were also numbingly complex, with the Warren Commission alone generating nearly a million pages of testimony, exhibits, and evidence. Few news organizations had the resources to wade through that morass, and fewer still the willingness to contend with frequently Byzantine claims of often-bizarre buffs. "The people who believe in conspiracy theories are the quickest to become extremely vituperative," investigative reporter Seymour Hersh had told an interviewer, explaining his aversion to looking into the assassination. "One of these people calls you with a conspiracy theory and you say, 'I don't buy it.' And they say, 'Sure you don't buy it. It's because you are part of the conspiracy.' It's a gestalt I don't like."

Hersh conveyed the same sentiments to Stone during the *Post* fight. But Stone, who'd been collecting a catalogue of the press's numerous assassination errors, didn't seem to listen. Instead, he was far more impressed with a 1977 Carl Bernstein article quoting CIA officials as saying that the agency maintained four hundred reporters on its payroll (among them journalists at *Time* and the *Post*) and a 1967 CIA memo detailing stratagems for countering critics of the Warren Commission. "Discuss the publicity problem with . . . friendly elite contacts, especially . . . editors," the agency had ordered its stations. "Employ propaganda assets to answer and refute the attacks of the critics . . . reviews and feature articles are particularly appropriate for this purpose." The words were all Stone required to believe that forces most malevolent were out to get him.

"I'm sure he believes that Luce was part of the illuminati or some crazy thing," said a Stone friend, after listening to the director claim that "the Nazi way of thinking is very deeply embedded" in the media. "But that's Oliver: He needs his enemies to do good work."

Enemies Stone was gathering, and in copious supply. Some were galvanized by his cavalier regard for Shaw (as "a joke," Stone has filmed a not-to-be-used scene showing

Shaw's jury bringing in a guilty verdict), others by his stubborn defense of Garrison, who himself was now apologizing to some of those he'd indicted. True, Stone conceded, the D.A. had suffered from hubris and had made serious mistakes, but that, he said, "only makes him like King Lear." Besides, Stone went on, "Garrison was trying to force a break in the case. If he could do that, it was worth the sacrifice of one man. When they went onto the shores of Omaha Beach, they said, 'We're going to lose five, ten, fifteen thousand people to reach our objective.' I think Jim was in that kind of situation."

Stone was still explaining that comment when difficulties of a different sort arose, caused not by his enemies but by his ally, Fletcher Prouty.

The PROBLEM and the ANSWER

IT WAS A SMALL thing that started the trouble, so small it had almost gone unnoticed. Paging through a tiny, left-wing New York weekly, Stone's researchers had chanced upon an article identifying the colonel as a cause célèbre in the virulently anti-Semitic, racist Liberty Lobby. According to the story, Prouty the previous fall had been a featured speaker at the Lobby's annual convention; he contributed to its national radio program and newsletter (which featured such articles as "The Diary of Anne Frank Is a Fraud" and "White Race Becoming an Endangered Species"); and along with a grab bag of rightist crackpots, he'd been recently named to the national policy advisory board of the Lobby's Populist Action Committee.

At Camelot Productions, where Prouty was regarded as a genial, grandfatherly figure, the initial reaction was disbelief. It quickly turned to horror as more information poured in. The Lobby, it turned out, had been founded by one Willis Carto—an ex-John Birch Society functionary who, in addition to expressing admiration for Hitler, believed that Jews were, as he put it, "public enemy number one." He is "a very sincere and well-educated man," Prouty said. "I want to be for the things he's for."

That Prouty should be associated, even remotely, with Carto's views, was a public-relations time bomb. The bad news, though, did not end there. Garrison, Stone's staff discovered, had also appeared on the Lobby's radio program; and Prouty had sold the reprint rights to his book to the Lobby's Noontide Press, whose other offer-

ings included numerous works arguing that the Holocaust was "a Jew-sponsored hoax."

When questioned, Prouty, the intelligence expert, pleaded ignorance. He had not known of Carto's Nazi leanings, he insisted; nor had he been aware that one of his fellow advisory-board members had been the leader of the Mississippi Ku Klux Klan, nor that the Committee itself was the successor to a Lobby-sponsored political party that in 1988 had nominated former KKK chieftain David Duke its presidential candidate. "I'm on [their] board," said Prouty, "but I don't know anything about it." As for his publisher's assertion that the Holocaust was a lie, Prouty, who claims to have spoken at a National Holocaust Museum ceremony, would say only, "I'm no authority in that area." "My God," moaned a Stone assistant after listening to the rationalizations. "If this gets out, Oliver is going to look like the biggest dope of all time."

Stone—whose father is Jewish, as it happens—seemed unconcerned. After being assured by Prouty that he was neither a racist nor an anti-Semite ("I never met a Jew I didn't like," said Prouty) but merely a writer in need of a platform, he rejected advice to drop the colonel as a technical adviser and to rewrite Mr. X so that Prouty could not be identified. "I'm doing a film on the assassination of John Kennedy," said Stone, "not the life of Fletcher Prouty."

The bullheadedness had an element of calculation, because by then, Stone had recruited a Vietnam adviser with far more heft than Prouty, an active-duty U.S. Army major named John Newman.

Meticulous, low-key, methodical—everything, in sum, Prouty was not—Newman had been quietly working with Stone since the spring of 1991. He'd first learned of the film from a publishing friend who informed him that Stone had an assassination movie in the works, in which Vietnam would figure prominently. Stone's thesis, the friend had said, was that Kennedy, had he lived, would have withdrawn from Vietnam—precisely the subject that Newman, a highly experienced intelligence specialist, had been privately researching for his Ph.D. thesis for nearly a decade. During that time, he had ferreted out fifteen thousand pages of documents—three times the total of the Pentagon Papers—and interviewed scores of top-ranking sources. The data, checked and rechecked, had led him, bit by bit, doubt by doubt, to an explosive conclusion: Not only had Kennedy put in motion the withdrawal just weeks before his death, but an intricate secret operation, involving the U.S. Saigon command and certain

U.S.-based foreign-policy officials, had been systematically deceiving the White House about the disastrous course of the war.

The extent of the scheme had been staggering. Body counts, pacification rates, captured-weapons totals, defectors—"the start-to-finish works," as Newman put it—all had been deliberately inflated, even as estimates of enemy strength had been deliberately slashed by nearly two thirds. The purpose of the fakery, which dwarfed any of the war's subsequent falsehoods, had been two-fold: to discourage thoughts of quick withdrawal and, at the same time, encourage the infusion of U.S. matériel and men. In design, it was meant to put the first light at the end of the Vietnam tunnel.

Not everyone, though, had been misled. Even as Kennedy and his statistics-minded defense secretary, Robert McNamara, were being consistently lied to, a small number of administration hawks were being provided the truth by means of a secret back channel. Among that select circle, Newman found, had been the next in line in presidential succession, Lyndon Johnson.

Newman's painstakingly documented research established the vice-president's back-channel role conclusively—just as it did when the actual facts of the war were ultimately disclosed. That revelation had come in Honolulu, during a conference attended by senior members of the cabinet and the U.S. Saigon command. Later cited as proof that JFK's goals in Vietnam had continued after the assassination undisturbed, the meeting had been highlighted by a call by the military for a massive American buildup—a recommendation Kennedy had, in fact, repeatedly rejected. Change, though, was in the wind. It was November 20, 1963, when the conferees sat down in Honolulu. In two days, there would be a new president; in six, a new policy in Vietnam.

Characteristically cautious, Newman had made no public claim that either the deception plan or the timing of the Honolulu conference was linked to the assassination. All the same, the implications of his discoveries were obvious, as was their potential worth to Stone, who was still basing his Vietnam theories on Prouty's less-than-definitive NSAMs. Initially, Newman had been reluctant to become involved. Beyond worries about the reaction of his military superiors (who had twice denied Stone help on other films), he was dubious about Stone, whom, he'd been warned, was pursuing conspiracy will-o'-the-wisps. "If you get attached to that movie," a buff friend advised, "you'll be a limousine following a garbage truck." The ramrod-straight Newman was

torn: repelled by what he'd been told about Garrison, and Stone's belief in him; drawn by an old-fashioned sense of duty. "I had a choice," Newman said later. "I could either sit back and wring my hands that Oliver Stone was some kind of bad guy, or I could try to do something with him for the sake of history." Finally, after several weeks of agonizing, Newman sent Stone a fifty-word telegram summarizing who he was and what he had found. The invitation to come to California arrived the next morning.

Since then, Newman had become a key but—at his own insistence—covert cog in the production. From his home in Virginia, where he was racing to finish a book for a publisher Stone had found for him, he talked frequently to the director by phone, and, on his own time, visited him a number of times in California and Dallas. Stone relied heavily on his advice, and despite continuing attacks from the media, which had now zeroed in on JFK's Vietnam hypothesis (libel and nonsense, Lardner had called it in the *Post*), had upheld a pledge that he would in no way use Newman's intelligence credentials to promote the film. Grateful and increasingly impressed by Stone, Newman had steadily taken on more duties, including writing several key scenes in the movie and screening conspiracy updates that continued to come in from the ever-volatile Prouty. The latter was a crucial chore, for by the time the production reached Washington in late July, the colonel was causing troubles Stone could no longer ignore.

The new difficulty had its origins in Prouty's ongoing association with Harrison Livingstone, a contentious Baltimore author who'd won notoriety some years before by offering to sell a set of the Kennedy autopsy photos. The circumstances under which Livingstone had obtained the pictures were murky; what was certain was that Livingstone had a propensity for seeing people plotting against him, among them a Stone consultant, whom Livingstone publicly accused of being a CIA agent. Livingstone was also suspected of sending Stone an anonymous fax warning that a rival buff (another supposed CIA agent) was sabotaging JFK through a convoluted plan dubbed Operation Bad Boy. When Stone failed to hire him as a consultant, Livingstone turned on Stone himself, charging in a letter to Warren Commission critics that the director had pirated his work, nearly ruined him financially, and, in the bargain, committed sedition, which Livingstone defined as "communication . . . which has as its objective the stirring up of treason."

It was such behavior that prompted many experts to give Livingstone a wide and

wary berth. A notable exception was Prouty, who'd been assisting him in writing a book that would, Livingstone claimed, unravel the plot. Who the culprits were, Livingstone wouldn't say until publication. Not so discreet, Prouty was hinting that one of the plotters—the Ring, he called them—was none other than former Harvard dean, Kennedy national security adviser, and Ford Foundation president McGeorge Bundy. The preposterousness of the suggestion shook Stone. He was rattled even more to be informed by Newman that the colonel's Vietnam expertise was not all that had been assumed.

Newman's alarm sprang from a fax that Prouty had written after reading a declassified draft of NSAM 273. Composed on November 21, the draft had taken a substantially tougher line than October's NSAM 263, in which Kennedy had laid out his withdrawal plans. Nonetheless, the draft stopped well short of repudiating the president's goals. But that was not how Prouty read it. "That signature [on NSAM 273] puts him [Bundy] in a real nutcracker," he wrote to Stone. "To me, it appears that this strange Bundy move was some sort of a signal."

There was no signal, sinister or otherwise. Not only did the draft NSAM represent no real change in Kennedy policy, but Bundy's signature did not appear on it.

Bluntly, Newman tried to set Stone straight. "Oliver," he cautioned in a confidential fax, "I must tell you that if in your movie or on a talk show you say that McGeorge Bundy signed a document November 21 that suggests he was in on the murder, you will be made a laughing stock, and even buffoons like Lardner will have a field day." Then, in a sign of how well Newman was coming to know Stone, he added, "Be careful of oversimplifying things, Oliver. It will get you into trouble."

Newman's warning came at a particularly low moment for Stone. Former LBJ aide and Motion Picture Association of America president Jack Valenti had just gone on record criticizing the movie, and Robert Blakey, who had led the House probe of the assassination, had told a reporter, "I think the whole thing should be interred in Arlington Cemetery." Stories were also circulating that Warners was displeased as well. The studio, it was said, was especially unsettled by the seventh and latest version of the script, which had Johnson telling his advisers, "You just get me reelected and you can have your goddamn war." The fact that such a scene had actually occurred and been previously reported did little to assuage Warner's alleged anxiety.

Despite Stone's employment of Robert Kennedy press secretary Frank Mankiewicz

as the production's senior public-relations adviser, the media also continued hammering at JFK, and more critical articles were in the works. "Oliver's had bad press before," shuddered Robert Spiegelman, a mass-communications professor serving as a Stone consultant, "but this is going to be the shit storm of his life."

The shoot too seemed to be taking its toll. After more than a year of seven-day weeks, researching, writing, filming, and editing, Stone was "a real bear," as one of his closest associates put it. His humor was not helped any by how he was treating his body. Evenings out with Costner, he was sometimes drinking, he admitted, more than he should, and what moments he did have for rest were often taken up composing responses to his enemies in the press. "Christ," Stone grouched after one such late-night session. "I feel like a presidential candidate going through all this. Why do I have to defend my movie? I'm not running for office and I'm not asking for a reopening of the investigation. I'm making a movie that will come and go." With only days remaining until wrap, the problem was not Stone's condition, however; it was Fletcher Prouty, who was still saying of the draft NSAM: "There is a terrific story in those papers. They make it clear that someone was preparing the White House for the murder of JFK. . . . This is what the death of JFK is all about." Finally, on the second-to-last day of filming, Stone decided to act.

The showdown took place in an Interior Department office that had been made over to appear like the Pentagon lair of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. While technicians set lights for the next scene, Stone summoned in Prouty and Newman and came right to the point. Prouty's association with Livingstone must immediately end. No more information was to be provided to him, and Prouty was to do his utmost to ensure that he would not publish anything that would discredit the film. Then Stone turned to Prouty's misreading of the critical NSAM. "What's the story, Fletch?" he asked.

Prouty began by saying that he had confused the four-page draft NSAM 273 with the one-paragraph NSAM 263. When Stone, who had seen both documents, appeared dubious, Prouty switched tactics, claiming that the draft NSAM was a forgery and that the source from which it had come—namely, the Kennedy Library—had been "infiltrated." At that, Newman tore into him. Prouty was wrong, he said; about Bundy, about "infiltration," about the NSAMs, about the entire case. Unaccustomed to being dressed down by a junior

officer, Prouty erupted. "Fletcher really went into orbit," recalled a witness to the meeting. "He jumped up and went into this long tirade about his forty years and how he had done everything and written everything and briefed everybody and if that wasn't good enough for Oliver, he was quitting."

At length, Stone managed to pacify Prouty and the session ended in edgy détente. The incident, though, seemed to mark a turning point for Stone, not only in his unquestioning regard for Prouty, from whom he gently began to distance himself, but in his attitude about the assassination and his film. Never again would he wax quite so rhapsodic about Garrison, whose appalling blunders he had belatedly begun to appreciate. Among his staff, which had long been trying to wean him from the D.A., there was hope that, in editing, Stone would loop in a line or two, making his new skepticism clear. Under the growing influence of more of the serious buffs, he was now even willing to admit doubt, not that there had been a conspiracy, or that Vietnam had been its ghastly consequence, but doubt in the certainty that he knew everything. For someone who claimed to have "truth in the eyeball," it was a seismic concession. How far it would extend, and with what results for JFK, was impossible to predict until prints were struck. But already Stone was sounding different. "When you make a movie like this," he reflected after another long editing session, "and you get attacked from all sides, sometimes you don't win. Sometimes you fail. But it is well worth it if you lost in an honorable cause. Pancho Villa, I always think of what he said: 'The defeats are also battles.'"

CLOSING CREDITS

THE LAST OF seventy-nine days of filming was in early August, at a spot on the Capitol Mall just a rifle shot from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. After nearly a week of rain in Washington, the skies were cloudless and sunny, and a large crowd had gathered, most of them to see Costner, who, after a round of golf the day before with George Bush, had brought along one of the President's daughters-in-law to witness his performance. She was very pretty and very rapt.

Leaning against a nearby tree, head in his hand, Donald Sutherland, who had flown in from Paris to play Mr. X, was using the Stanislavsky method, California-style, to ready himself. He asked for quiet and that no one smoke within a hundred yards of him.

Also present was a battery of flacks, among them a witness to another Kennedy assassination, Frank Mankiewicz, who, as he came up the greensward where the cameras were set, smiled to a friend, "You know, I think this is the prettiest grassy knoll I have ever seen."

As was his custom, the director went through everything over and over again, insuring that each dialogue fragment and facial tic was precisely right. He was taking special care with this scene; coming at the movie's final moments, Mr. X would reveal to Garrison why John Fitzgerald Kennedy had died. The answer was etched in the black marble listing 58,000 names.

While Stone worked, his crew mingled restlessly, eager to be done and attend a blowout wrap party that had been scheduled for that evening. "What's Ed Asner playing?" a spectator with memories of Lou Grant called over. Costner's double cracked back: "The Texas School Book Depository."

A ripple of laughter snaked through the set. Stone grinned, but just barely. He appeared exhausted, yet unwilling to let go of what had been his obsession for the last year. "It's funny," he told a friend as the cameras were repositioned a last time. "Here I am, looking at these monuments"—he stopped and gestured at the Capitol and the obelisk to Washington in the distance—"these monuments I used to come and see as a kid. God, I was so impressed by the government then." He stopped and turned back to the slash in the earth where middle-aged men in ill-fitting combat fatigues were laying flowers. "And now," he resumed, "there's this. This. . ."

Before he could say more his assistant director cut in. The light was fading and preparations for the final retake were finished. The action this time went flawlessly. As Costner walked off, burdened by what Mr. X has told him about the assassination and Vietnam, two pig-tailed black girls took their cue and, impossibly happy, began dancing over the knoll. And then, Oliver Stone, who'd been observing from beneath a tent that resembled nothing so much as a GI's hutch, did something that was both crazy and wonderful: He leaped up, and, as the cameras rolled, joined in.

As he played, all-at-once young again, it seemed a different era, a time when John Kennedy was alive and the country itself seemed young. In Oliver Stone's smile was a memory of what America had been, before "the bad guys," as he called them, had stolen its hopes. By making a movie, he'd searched for those villains, and found in his work the beginnings of an answer. Perhaps to the mystery of a crime. Perhaps to the puzzle of himself. 14