

Oliver Stone, Under Fire Over the Killing of J.F.K.

BY RICHARD B. ENSTEIN

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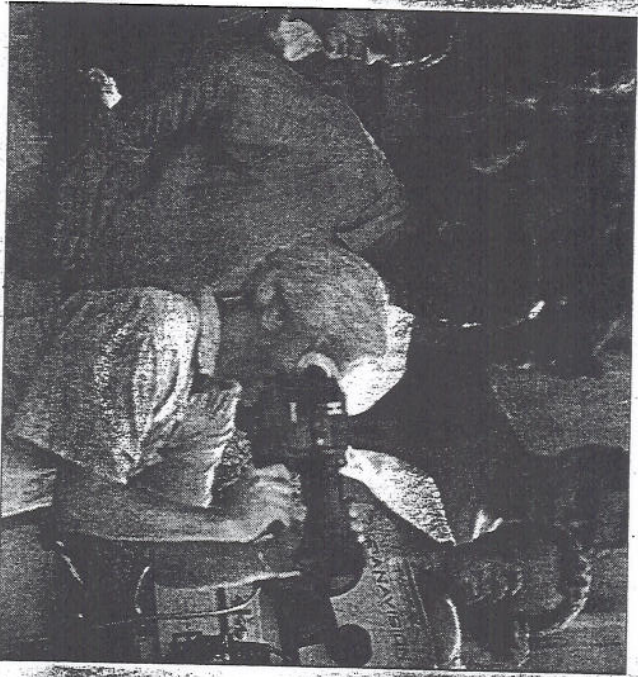
... the assassination, on Nov. 22, 1963, as part of a conspiracy and the Warren report as a Government cover-up. There is a videotape library; there are copies of Congressional investigations, C.I.A. reports, Xeroxed mag-
 ... articles from 20 years ago.

Mr. Stone, the writer-director of "Phantom," "Born on the Fourth of July" and, most recently, "The Doors," has suggested a visit to the research department. His purpose is clear.

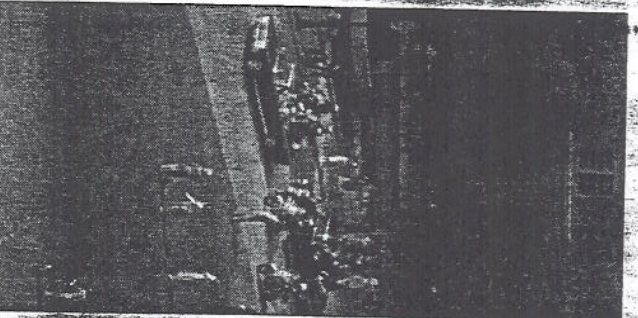
Months before release of his new movie, written by Mr. Stone and Zachary Sklar — indeed, well before filming is finished — "JFK" has come under assault. There have been articles in the Washington Post, Time, Newsweek, and the New York Times-Picaresque. In the Washington Post, Time, Newsweek, and the New York Times-Picaresque, the author is accused of being the "far-out number" of conspiraciers.

The theory, specifically, is that of Jim Garrison, the District Attorney of New Orleans, in the late 1960's who put a local businessman on trial in 1968 for plotting with Lee Harvey Oswald and others to kill the President. (The jury decided on a not-guilty verdict after less than an hour of deliberation.) Mr. Garrison's hypothesis was "zany." The Washington Post has charged. The district attorney himself, according to an article in the Times-Picaresque, knew that his case amounted to nothing, but he cynically pursued it to get publicity. In short, the accusation is that Oliver Stone doesn't know what he is talking about in his film, which stars Kevin Costner as Mr. Garrison, Gary Oldman as Lee Harvey Oswald and Tommy Lee Jones as Clay Shaw, the accused businessman.

Mr. Stone has been fighting back, answering his critics in letters and articles. And now, in New Orleans, he wants to show that his "JFK" does not spring full-blown out of some paranoid, conspiracy-theory imagination. Every point, every argument, every detail in the movie, he says, has been researched, can be documented and is justified.



Mark Anderson (left), directing "JFK", above right, a scene from the film's re-creation of the assassination



Dennis Henning (New Orleans) looking at the film's re-creation of the assassination

doubted the conspiracy theories. In this sense, the film directorizer had been reversed on "I believed that Lee Oswald shot the President," Mr. Stone said. "I believed that Lee Oswald shot the President."

Critics have taken aim at the director even before his film on the assassination is finished.

... Eventually, the skepticism extended to the Warren Commission's report. "The Warren Commission's report is a conspiracy to kill Kennedy, though it hasn't found any conspirators." All during the 1970's and 1980's, Mr. Stone said, "there are these seismic shocks, let's say, and then you hear all kinds of weird evidence coming in here, and there, new autopsy reports, new forensic evidence. It just drifted in, but we never got it all at once. Time kind of deflates discovery."

What made him focus seriously on the assassination was a 1988 book, "On the Trail of the Assassins" by Mr. Garrison — the only person ever to put someone on trial for conspiracy to murder President Kennedy. The defendant, Clay Shaw, according to some witnesses, had been overheard discussing a plan to kill Kennedy with Oswald and another alleged plotter, David Ferrie.

Mr. Garrison believed that the plotters for compromises he made after the Cuban missile crisis. He also believed that the Government covered up the truth and, as he built his case, promised he would solve all of

"I didn't want to make a movie of the Garrison book only," he said. "He is the protagonist, but the book ends essentially in 1969, and I wanted to push the movie into the new ground that was uncovered after 1969 and pre-'69 — the autopsies, the bullets, the work of other researchers. So, I've taken dramatic license. It is not a true story per se. It is not the Jim Garrison story. It is a film called 'JFK.' It explores all the possible scenarios of why Kennedy was killed, who killed him and why."

Mr. Stone notes what others have noted before him — that rarely, if ever, has a movie attracted such assault before anybody has seen it, even before most of it had been filmed. Perhaps this is not surprising. For nearly 20 years, the Kennedy assassination has provoked intense debate between those who convinced that Kennedy was killed by Lee Harvey Oswald acting alone and those who believe Kennedy was killed as part of a conspiracy — perhaps by agents of Fidel Castro, maybe by anti-Castro Cubans. Some have accumulated evidence supposedly indicating that the Mafia was behind the murder. Others think it was the Central Intelligence Agency, which, the theory goes, wanted to forestall an effort by Kennedy to make peace with Castro and withdraw from Vietnam.

"What actually happens in the movie is that you see different scenarios, different possible conclusions," Mr. Stone said, comparing the movie more to the 1951 Japanese classic "Rashomon," in which the same event is seen from several points of view, than to a straightforward, unequivocal defense of any particular theory. At the same time, however, Mr. Stone makes clear that he himself strongly favors the conspiracy theory and rejects the Warren Commission findings.

"If the movie is cut the way I think it's going to be cut, and if you are a neutral person, I think you will leave the theater ready to think about things, and, I hope, to rethink them, and maybe to go back and read some more and begin to wonder about some of the events, some of the sacred cows, some of the official story," Mr. Stone said. "Because that's what I think the Warren Commission is. It's America's official story."

The negative articles about "JFK" have largely been based on a draft of a screenplay that, he says, has since been revised. Mr. Stone is clearly worried that the advance publicity could lead the public to form a negative opinion of "JFK" before the film, budgeted at about \$40 million, is finished. He says that initially he accepted the conclusions of the Warren Commission and

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Stone, Under Fire For 'JFK,' Fights Back



Associated Press

New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison at a 1967 news conference about impending arrests in the assassination conspiracy

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the mysteries about the Kennedy murder. But witnesses were discredited in the trial, and Shaw was quickly acquitted. Mr. Garrison's conspiracy theory lost whatever following it may have had. Mr. Stone allows that, at first, he also put little credence in Mr. Garrison, finding him "a Southern buffoon, a Huey Long type." Eventually, however, he chose to make Mr. Garrison and his unsuccessful investigation the centerpiece of his movie.

"I got 'On the Trail of the Assassins,' and I purchased the movie rights for it immediately," Mr. Stone said. "It read like a Dashiell Hammett whodunit. It starts out as a bit of a seedy crime with small traces, and then the detective 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. The theme is more why Kennedy was killed rather than who did it. It's a whydunit."

But, it is a whydunit that many have long felt was a travesty. Writing in The Times-Picayune, Rosemary James, who covered the Shaw trial for the newspaper, asserted in a recent article that Mr. Garrison's investigation was a cynical ploy by which he ruined the career of a man he knew to be innocent to further his own ambitions. "Now," Ms. James concludes, speaking of Oliver Stone, "comes a gullible from La-La Land ... who wants to regurgitate all of that garbage." Mr. Garrison was unavailable to respond to a request to reply to Ms. James's assertions.

Ms. James is joined by other critics, most notably George Lardner, the national security writer for The Washington Post. In an article in

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