

Does 'J.F.K.' Conspire Against Reason?

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Wrong

By TOM WICKER

MORE THAN HALFWAY INTO "J.F.K.," Oliver Stone's three-hour movie about the assassination of President Kennedy, New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison and his wife, Liz, are seen watching a television documentary about Mr. Garrison's investigation of the events of Nov. 22, 1963, in Dallas.

The documentary's anchorman is heard charging that the District Attorney used improper methods to get witnesses to support his case against the New Orleans businessman Clay Shaw for his part in a supposed conspiracy surrounding the murder of President Kennedy. Kevin Costner, portraying Mr. Garrison, suggests by facial expression and dialogue that the charge is

Tom Wicker, now a Times columnist, covered the assassination of John F. Kennedy for the newspaper.

Oliver Stone transforms a discredited theory into the sole explanation for the assassination.

In fact, of all the numerous conspiracy theorists and zealous investigators who for nearly 30 years have been peering at and probing the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Mr. Garrison may be the most thoroughly discredited — and not just by the NBC documentary. His ballyhooed investigation ended ignominiously when his chosen villain, Clay Shaw, was acquitted; and the whole Garrison affair is now regarded, even by other conspiracy believers, as having been a travesty of legal process.

Despite all this, Jim Garrison is clearly the film's

unfair and rigged to destroy his credibility — thus attacking the credibility of the documentary.

Frequently in "J.F.K.," the District Attorney alleges that the media are engaged in a coverup of a monstrous conspiracy, which Mr. Stone confidently depicts as having resulted in the assassination of a President, the war in Vietnam, the later killing of Robert Kennedy, perhaps even the murder of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

It is a measure of Mr. Stone's heavily weighted storytelling that he gives only a fleeting glimpse of that one-hour documentary, which was broadcast by NBC on June 19, 1967. Its evidence — the script is available — establishes without doubt that Mr. Garrison and his aides threatened and bribed witnesses, who then lied in court, and that they concealed the results of a polygraph test that showed one witness, Vernon Bundy, to be lying.

So much for the advertising for the Stone film, which proclaims of Mr. Garrison: "He will risk his life, the lives of his family, everything he holds dear for the one thing he holds sacred — the truth."

hero. He is played by Mr. Costner, one of Hollywood's hottest box-office attractions, fresh from his triumph in "Dances With Wolves." Sissy Spacek plays his wife, and in an arrogant bit of casting against type, the real-life Mr. Garrison makes a cameo appearance as Chief Justice Earl Warren.

"J.F.K.," which opens on Friday, stirred controversy last summer when a draft of Mr. Stone and Zachary Sklar's screenplay found its way to the press. Based chiefly on Mr. Garrison's 1988 book, "On the Trail of the Assassins," it adopts his argument that Lee Harvey Oswald — the lone Presidential assassin, according to the Warren Commission — was merely a patsy put forward to shield the actions of an immense body of conspirators involved in the murder and coverup.

The controversy arose over fears that the film would develop a web of speculation and fiction around a tragic event of major historic significance. And indeed, it does treat matters that are wholly speculative, as fact

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and truth, in effect rewriting history.

Mr. Stone built into his movie an all-encompassing defense. As in the scene of the television documentary, the film's Jim Garrison repeatedly says that any critics of his thesis are either part of the great conspiracy he has conceived or are helping to cover it up. The only one of his assistants who argues and disagrees with him is shown to have been coerced by the F.B.I., a primary participant in Mr. Garrison's sprawling conspiracy.

Of course, any article critical of the movie — this one included — can be dismissed in the same way, as part of the alleged conspiracy or its continuing coverup. Mr. Stone has already called himself, in U.S.A. Today, a target for "a thousand and one vultures out there, crouched on their rocks." These were not just "the usual Hollywood vultures," he said, but "a lot of these paid-off journalist hacks that are working on the East Coast with their recycled [sic] political theories

But there's a gaping hole in the movie's advance counterattack: If a conspiracy as vast and consequential as the one claimed could have been carried out and covered up for three decades, why did the conspirators or their heirs allow Mr. Stone to make this movie? Why not murder him, as they supposedly murdered others? Why, for that matter, didn't they knock off Mr. Garrison himself when — as Mr. Stone tells it with so much assurance — the New Orleans District Attorney began so fearlessly to follow their trail?

Piecing Together A Great Conspiracy

"J.F.K." begins with real footage of President Eisenhower's farewell address, in which he eloquently warned of the dangers of the "military-industrial complex." This sets up Mr. Stone's contention — borrowed, or swallowed whole, from Mr. Garrison — that generals, admirals and war profiteers so strongly wanted the war in Vietnam to be fought and the United States to stand tall and tough against the Soviets that when President Kennedy seemed to question these goals, he had to be killed so Vice President Johnson could take office. Mr. Stone clearly implies that this was done with Johnson's connivance.

"Who benefited?" asks Donald Sutherland in one of the film's frequent star turns in minor parts. (Jack Lemmon, Walter Matthau and Ed Asner provide others.) Mr. Sutherland, playing an unnamed former military officer who sounds like any of a number of hawkish fanatics hanging around Washington, specifically names such beneficiaries as Johnson and the Bell Corporation, which supplied helicopters for Vietnam.

President Kennedy, historian Stone asserts, was considered "soft on Communism" after the test-ban treaty with the Soviet Union and a conciliatory speech at American University, both in 1963. No doubt some in the military and the John Birch Society held that paranoid view; but to anyone active in Washington at that time it's ridiculous to suggest that such an opinion was widely shared.

Mr. Stone's film nevertheless insists that Mr. Kennedy had so enraged the nation's hawks that the military-industrial complex, with the help of the Central Intelligence Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, actually planned and carried out the assassination, then covered it up through the Warren Commission (ostensibly set up to investigate the assassination and headed by Chief Justice Warren), with the aid of the Dallas police and the nation's press and television.

Mr. Stone may be on firmer ground when he claims that the assassination prevented President Kennedy from carrying out a planned withdrawal from Vietnam. That Kennedy might not have expanded the war as President Johnson did in 1964 is a plausible, if not conclusive, argument; I made it myself

in 1968, in a speculative passage of my book "J.F.K. and L.B.J." It seems less likely that Kennedy had already decided, at the time of his death, to extricate the nation from the quagmire of Vietnam after his expected reelection: Still, it's arguable that he had so decided, or soon would have.

Mr. Stone not only depicts these debatable possibilities as facts; his film claims that for these reasons Mr. Kennedy was killed — though I know of no reputable historian who has documented Mr. Kennedy's intentions, much less found them the motive for his murder. It's true that this motive, among numerous others, has been speculated upon before, in more or less responsible terms, depending on who was doing the speculating.

But this movie presents itself as more than speculation; it claims truth for itself. And among the many Americans likely to see it, particularly those who never accepted the Warren Commission's theory of a single as-

The film contends that generals, admirals and war profiteers wanted the President dead.

sassin, even more particularly those too young to remember Nov. 22, 1963, "J.F.K." is all too likely to be taken as the final, unquestioned explanation.

Flashily put together under Mr. Stone's famous imprimatur and using much film footage of actual events and real people, starring the Hollywood idol Kevin Costner, and confident of its own rightness and righteousness, "J.F.K." may prove persuasive to audiences with little knowledge of the events presented. Asserting that the future of justice in America depends on the exposure of Mr. Stone's nightmarish visions of conspiracy, as discovered through the depicted heroism of Jim Garrison, the film is also presented — especially in a long and weepy courtroom summation by Jim Garrison — as a call to courage and idealism, which may appeal to a people apparently hungry for both.

But if "J.F.K." and its wild assertions are to be taken at face value, Americans will have to accept the idea that most of the nation's major institutions, private as well as governmental, along with one of its Presidents, conspired together and carried out Kennedy's murder to pursue the war in Vietnam and the Cold War, then covered up the conspiracy until Mr. Garrison and Mr. Stone unearthed and exposed it.

Evidence Presented From a Stacked Deck

In an era when mistrust of government and loss of confidence in institutions (the press not least) are widespread and virulent, such a suggestion seems a dubious public service, particularly since these dark allegations are only unproven speculations, and the "evidence" presented is often a stacked deck.

President Kennedy, for instance, is pictured in real footage, being interviewed by Walter Cronkite on the first 30-minute broadcast of evening news by CBS, a few weeks before the assassination. The President's remarks indicated that he was becoming disillusioned with the war in Vietnam, thus seeming to support Mr. Stone's insistent thesis.

But the film does not even mention Mr. Kennedy's interview with David Brinkley a week later, when NBC began its 30-minute news program. Then, the President confirmed his belief in the "domino theory" — which suggested that the fall of Vietnam to Communism would precipitate collapses in the surrounding countries in Southeast Asia — and added: "China is so large, looms so high . . . that if South Vietnam went, it would not only give them an improved geographic position for a guerrilla assault on Malaya but would also give the impression that the wave of the future in Southeast Asia was China and the Communists."

There's no suggestion of withdrawal in that later interview; and even if Mr. Kennedy may have been balancing his earlier remarks owing to protests from Saigon and from American hawks, it is misleading for Mr. Stone to cite only one of two equally verifiable texts, the one favorable to his case.

Again, when Jim Garrison watches the shooting of Robert Kennedy (in 1968) on television, he tells his wife that now he's "really scared." Liz Garrison, who has been doubtful of her husband's case, suddenly believes in him. This turnaround leaves the extraordinary impression that Robert Kennedy's murder somehow proved that Mr. Garrison was right about John Kennedy's murder and the great conspiracy. Just what this "proof" consists of, the film does not attempt to explain.

The depiction of the Robert Kennedy assassination, though using real news footage, includes two bits of trickery. Adroit cutting makes it appear as though he were shot while concluding his speech to an applauding audience on the night of his victory in the California primary; actually, he had left the stage

and was departing through a hotel kitchen when he was cut down. Mr. Garrison not only sees the shooting on television; he immediately tells his wife that Robert Kennedy has been killed — when, in fact, Kennedy lived until the following night.

An alert listener also will pick up, in many of the speeches by Jim Garrison and his dedicated aides, a number of phrases like "has something to do with," "what if," "a possibility," "may well have been," "possibly." Such hedges make it clear that even Mr. Stone cannot be sure that all the "facts" he throws out relentlessly are facts.

The Warren Commission: Part of the Problem?

Through frequent, detailed discussions of their investigation by Jim Garrison and his assistants, Mr. Stone is merciless in his assault on the Warren Commission — not merely the report's errors of omission and commission but the group's alleged complicity in the conspiracy and the coverup.

At one point in the film, Jim Garrison refers to Arlen Specter, who as a member of the commission staff had devised its controversial "single-bullet" theory, as one of the "grossest liars" in the nation. Some who watched Mr. Specter, now a Republican Senator from Pennsylvania, during the Clarence Thomas hearings may be tempted to agree; but the reference is another attempt to picture the commission report as a deliberate falsehood and part of a widespread coverup.

The Warren Commission was under time pressure; its report was hurried out, and it contains errors, omissions and debatable interpretations. Its conclusion that Oswald, acting alone, killed John Kennedy, is widely disbelieved. The commission is a fair target for criticism of its procedures and findings; but you have to be paranoid indeed to believe that the Chief Justice and his colleagues deliberately framed Oswald for a crime he didn't commit, while covering the tracks of the many who were actually responsible.

When the Warren Commission report began to be widely questioned, I discussed it — sometime in the late 60's — with Edward Bennett Williams, the renowned criminal lawyer. He defended the report in the following manner:

In every crime to which there are no credible eyewitnesses, the prosecution (in this case the Warren Commission) examines available evidence and presents a theory of what may have happened. The defense presents an opposing theory. Neither theory is likely to be airtight, without flaws or

questionable assertions; even physical evidence, let alone circumstantial, is not likely to be that indisputable. But in the end, a jury usually believes one theory or the other, and convicts or acquits on that basis.

The commission report, Williams said, was a prosecution theory and, as such, did have holes and deficiencies. But he believed a jury would accept it in preference to any other theory that at that time had been presented. Considered by itself, the commission report might be picked apart by its critics; but what, Williams asked, did they present in its place? Was any other theory of what happened in Dallas as plausible? Until a more believable theory was brought forward, the commission report seemed to him the most reasonable explanation of what had happened.

I agree with that, though my opinion is not held dogmatically. I'm willing to believe that Oswald did not act alone, or that he was innocent of the killing, or that there was a conspiracy, or that the mob did it in response to Robert Kennedy's actions as Attorney General, or that Fidel Castro was or was not involved as a result of the Bay of Pigs fiasco and the Cuban missile crisis, or any combination of the above. I'm willing, but only if someone presents an explanation of what happened that's believable and reasonable — not paranoid and fantastic.

After many years of consideration, I doubt that the truth about the Kennedy assassination has yet been told. It may never be. So to question what happened, to doubt the Warren Commission's or anybody's version, is legitimate, perhaps even necessary, but in my opinion not conclusive.

My dissent from Mr. Stone's film is not that he believes that Oswald was a patsy or there was a conspiracy or even that he depicts the conspiracy as fascist, a corruption of Constitutional government so far-reaching as to threaten the end of the democratic system in America. He has a right to believe those things, even to believe against the evidence that Mr. Garrison's shabby investigation was a noble and selfless search for truth.

But I and other Americans have an equal right not to believe such things, a right to our own beliefs. Mr. Stone insists on one true faith about Nov. 22, 1963 — as though only he and Mr. Garrison could discern the truth, among the many theories of what happened that terrible day. Moreover, he implies that anyone who doesn't share his one true faith is either an active part of a coverup or passively acquiescent in it.

Finally, he uses the powerful instrument of a motion picture, and relies on stars of the entertainment world, to propagate the one true faith — even though that faith, if widely accepted, would be contemptuous of the very Constitutional government Mr. Stone's film purports to uphold. □

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