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Oliver Stone's "JFK"

In Washington

FORREST SAWYER..... Host

Guest

In Dallas

OLIVER STONE..... Filmmaker

TOM BETTAG..... Executive Producer

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Oliver Stone's "JFK"

FORREST SAWYER: [voice-over] Nearly three decades after it happened, the question lives on: who really killed President John F. Kennedy? Tonight, in Dallas, a movie premieres that puts forth a frightening theory, that it was a plot by the military-industrial complex.

KEVIN COSTNER, "Jim Garrison": ["JFK," Warner Brothers] This was a military-style ambush, from start to finish. This was a coup d'état, with Lyndon Johnson waiting in the wings.

SAWYER: [voice-over] Is JFK just a movie, or can one man's crusade actually succeed in rewriting history? We'll talk with director Oliver Stone tonight.

ANNOUNCER: This is ABC News Nightline. Substituting for Ted Koppel and reporting from New York, Forrest Sawyer.

SAWYER: For all the hoopla, Hollywood films usually show up at the neighborhood theater, make a little money — or a lot of money — and then fade away to the video store shelves. Rarely do directors walk into dangerous political territory, using their power and their skill to challenge established ideas. But Oliver Stone has done just that, spending an estimated \$40 million to assault the idea that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone, and to lay out his own theory of conspiracy.

All of this is a huge political and financial gamble, and it has not been easy. In the week before its release, Stone came under withering fire from critics, who ended their attacks somewhere just short of calling him a horse thief. There have already been a dozen documentaries about the assassination, and over 600 books, so why is JFK drawing so much heat? In a few minutes we'll hear from the director himself, but first, the critics have their turn: why Oliver Stone has become the most controversial director in America.

CORRESPONDENT: Jim Garrison, New Orleans district attorney, the man leading a sensational investigation of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

SAWYER: [voice-over] Jim Garrison burst into America's consciousness in 1967, with a startling claim: he could prove there was a conspiracy to kill President Kennedy. The problem was, the more he talked, the more he contradicted himself.

JIM GARRISON, former New Orleans District Attorney: The federal government, including key officials and the President of the United States more specifically, knew that President Kennedy was not killed by a lone assassin.

The President of the United States is not in any way involved. I'm satisfied that he has been fooled, too.

We don't think employees of the Central Intelligence Agency were involved.

Purely and simply, it was a case of former employees of the CIA.

HAROLD WEISBERG, Author: He is not the kind of man that you would think would perpetrate a fraud and a travesty, but his investigation was not in any sense an investigation. He was making it up as he went.

SAWYER: [voice-over] Garrison came up with a careening series of conspirators: Cuban exiles, homosexuals, finally, the military-industrial complex, always refusing to reveal his evidence. One aide resigned in disgust.

WILLIAM GURVICH, former Garrison Aide: Because I was one of Mr. Garrison's top aides, I have a copy of the master file, I did some of his key investigating. I know there is no evidence.

SAWYER: [voice-over] Garrison called the resignation part of the cover-up, and finally charged New Orleans businessman Clay Shaw with conspiracy. The trial was a shambles. A key witness said under cross-examination he had been repeatedly hypnotized by enemies who planted ideas in his head. Hood College history professor Gerald McKnight has taught a course in the Kennedy assassination for the past 10 years.

Prof. GERALD McKNIGHT, Hood College: Garrison's case was so weak, it was so preposterous, the witnesses in many cases were so outlandish, that in 50 minutes that jury came back with a verdict of not guilty.

REPORTER: You believe that he did not conspire to kill the President?

SHAW JUROR: I do. I do. I may admit, there could have been a conspiracy, but I do not believe that Mr. Shaw was involved in a conspiracy.

OLIVER STONE, Director: What we're doing is we're sort of acting as detectives, like Sherlock Holmes.

SAWYER: [voice-over] Enter Oliver Stone, 22 years later, with a new crusade, a film intended to reshape America's understanding of the past, and renovate Jim Garrison's tattered reputation. Stone has transformed the much-criticized district attorney into the quietly courageous Kevin Costner, not the real Garrison, but a dramatic metaphor, the symbol of the struggle for truth, a way to present Stone's own theory of who killed the President.

KEVIN COSTNER, "Jim Garrison": ["JFK," Warner Brothers] This was a military-style ambush, from start to finish. This was a coup d'état, with Lyndon Johnson waiting in the wings.

SAWYER: [voice-over] Who did it? People at the very top, from the CIA to military leaders to big-time industrialists. Kennedy was "soft on Communism" and wanted to pull out of Vietnam. Kennedy had to die, and the hawkish Lyndon Johnson flew in to keep the war alive.

Prof. G. ROBERT BLAKEY, Cons. Hse. Assassinations Committee: He's taken a left-wing paranoid thesis and supported it with fabricated evidence, you know, and has foisted it on the people of this country as if it were the truth, when it is demonstrably false.

SAWYER: [voice-over] Like it or not, JFK is a staggering

accomplishment, three hours and eight minutes of kaleidoscopic rendition of evidence, real footage blended with fiction, all there to sell the director's belief that America was taken over by a secret band of killers.

ROBERT SAM ANSON, "Esquire" Magazine: I mean, a child could watch this film, almost, and understand quite clearly what occurred on November 22nd, 1963. I think it's a remarkable accomplishment.

SAWYER: [voice-over] Which is exactly the problem, according to critics. They say young people unfamiliar with the evidence will be convinced by what they claim are numerous distortions of the truth. Point one. The Stone film ridicules a central element of the 1964 Warren Commission report. Stone says a single bullet could not have struck both President Kennedy and Texas Governor John Connally, and emerged virtually unscathed. He suggests the bullet may have been planted by a conspirator. In fact, scientific analysis by the House Assassinations Committee in 1978 led them to conclude such a shot was possible, and they proved the found bullet did hit Connally.

Prof. BLAKEY: That bullet and its trajectory is established, for anybody who wants to read the evidence, beyond all reasonable doubt, and to present it otherwise, without presenting the contradictory evidence, is distortion.

REPORTER: Did you shoot the President?

LEE HARVEY OSWALD: I didn't shoot anybody, no, sir.

SAWYER: [voice-over] Point two. The film argues Oswald may have been set up, and even suggests he could have tried to send a warning that there would be an assassination attempt. The House Assassinations Committee concluded there probably was some kind of conspiracy, but it also concluded Oswald did shoot the President.

Prof. BLAKEY: I am a seasoned federal prosecutor. I could secure a conviction of Lee Harvey Oswald if he had shot his brother-in-law in a back seat of a pickup truck in two to three days in a criminal case. He is guilty of killing John Kennedy beyond a reasonable doubt.

SAWYER: [voice-over] Point three. The film argues that a home movie of the assassination shows the President's head jerking back and to the left, proving he was shot from the front. In fact, recent scientific studies suggest the President could have reacted just that way if he were shot from the rear. Nineteen of 20 pathologists told the House Assassinations Committee their study of the autopsy convinced them Kennedy was hit from behind. The lone dissenter became a consultant to Oliver Stone.

ROBERT OSWALD, Lee Harvey Oswald's Brother: I'm absolutely convinced that Lee did it alone.

SAWYER: [voice-over] Stone's critics are not only historians and investigators. Oswald's own brother Robert says the film is dead wrong in its depiction of Lee.

Mr. OSWALD: Distorted the facts, eliminated the facts, moved them around the way they want to, but that's the American way, and only in America.

SAWYER: [voice-over] Oliver Stone has already endured one of the biggest rainstorms of political criticism in Holly-

wood history, much of it from people who haven't even seen the film. Even before the movie's release, he has been pilloried, accused of twisting history. The director has fought back, saying the establishment press is trying to kill the film, and that, too, bothers his critics.

Mr. WEISBERG: He's created a whole false campaign of the whole world out to get him, the establishment whatever that means. The whole world has ganged up on Oliver Stone to keep him from telling the truth, and he wouldn't know the truth if he fell in it.

SAWYER: Some of Stone's harshest critics agree with the director and with millions of Americans on one essential point: they do believe there was a conspiracy to kill the President. These critics are angry because Stone has made a powerful argument for a theory they consider ir-
responsible.

In a moment, you will hear the other side of this dispute, the director of *JFK*, Oliver Stone.

[Commercial break]

SAWYER: Joining us from Dallas, where he attended benefit screening of *JFK*, is Oliver Stone. Mr. Stone is the writer, the producer and the director of the film. He won an Oscar for directing *Born on the Fourth of July* in 1981 and in 1986 his film *Platoon* won an Oscar for best picture.

Oliver, I noticed you scribbling away as you were listening to the piece. It strikes me that that's really at the heart of this kind of debate, it's that back and forth that goes on between critics and people who try to move the story forward, in whatever direction they choose.

OLIVER STONE, Filmmaker: Yeah, well, that was quite a bill of goods you launched at me there, in a very short span of time. There's a lot more evidence that has obviously been left out, and I mean, it seems like that was the most damning evidence that was put forward at that point in time.

SAWYER: Well, actually, what that is are three points that people always seem to point at in this film, and frankly, it's interesting that you say there was a lot of evidence that was left out, because that's exactly what they say about you, and ultimately, when you do make these kinds of arguments, these kinds of points, you have to be selective about what you choose, I suppose.

Mr. STONE: Well, just off the top of my head, respond to some of the things that were said, quickly. If Mr. Blake, you know, is so convinced about Oswald's guilt, I would ask him to release the files from the House Select Assassinations Committee to the public, which have been sealed and embargoed until 2029. I would ask him also to work releasing the CIA files, the FBI files, and the military intelligence files on Oswald, on Ruby, on Dallas on Jack Kennedy and on people like Guy Bannister.

When he talks about the autopsy photos and the people, those official — and I quote, "official" — autopsy photos have never, ever been shown to the Parkland medical personnel, the 26 people that saw an exit-type wound to the back of Kennedy's head.

He talks about a "magic bullet." This "magic bullet" goes into in detail in the film, but never before. Sero Wa [sp?] is a top forensic pathologist and expert, and he is

ever before in the history of gunfire has there been a bullet like this, that has behaved like this, a bullet that paused 1.6 seconds after it exited from Kennedy and entered Governor Connally. These things—

SAWYER: Well, you see, we're not going to be able—

Mr. STONE: —these things, I mean, are, you know, thrown at me like this, and I find it inaccurate.

SAWYER: —we're not going to be able to debate all of these different points, but in the film you do make much of that "magic bullet," and the House Assassinations Committee, when I talked with Mr. Blakey and, in fact, I talked with investigators who have worked with the House Assassinations Committee, they say, "You know, what we really did," and the television program *Nova* did the same thing — "was try to lay out whether this trajectory was possible," and yes, it turns out that it was possible, based on the evidence that they saw, so it's that constant back and— I'm saying we can't really—

Mr. STONE: It's possible— Garrison in the trial says, you know, nuclear physics can prove that an elephant can hang by its tail from a daisy. It's possible, I think, to prove anything, but people who are in combat, who've seen warfare, it's impossible, in my opinion.

SAWYER: Help me understand what looks to me, as I've seen the film, to be a central thesis that winds through this. Am I right in thinking that it is your idea, your thesis, your belief that the military-industrial complex was at the heart of the assassination?

Mr. STONE: No. I think that the central research community of assassination people that have studied it — and I'm talking mostly about private people — have come to that conclusion, that what Garrison was saying in the late 1960s has been accepted now by key people in the assassination community.

SAWYER: Is this your view in the film? Are you arguing this point, to try to make it, to get it across?

Mr. STONE: I feel I would like— you know, obviously the film is, I don't know who and I don't know how, exactly. The film is based on certain facts, and we make certain speculations in the movie. The film is an hypothesis. We reach certain conclusions based on those facts. I would say that without a doubt, in my opinion, it is impossible for Oswald to have killed Kennedy alone. I also believe that elements of the government are the only ones possible to arrange a coup of this size and of this magnitude.

SAWYER: But I guess here is where those people who agree with you that there are some very, very serious questions about this assassination that have not been answered, who agree with you that likely there was a conspiracy, now they separate from you, because they believe that you've taken a great leap from those questions to drawing a conclusion that there was this vast conspiracy that led to the assassination, not only of John Kennedy, but Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King.

Mr. STONE: If you accept the fact that there is a motive, which no one in the American media did— on day one, when Kennedy was killed, we accepted the cover story that Oswald did it alone and that he was a bad guy in a window on the sixth floor, and he shot at Kennedy and he in turn

was killed by an angry vigilante, and case closed, it was dramatic, it was simple, it was a bit like a John Wayne western.

If you, in any— let's say in any foreign country where a political leader is killed, let's say the Gandhis in India, one blown up recently, the press asks immediately, government bodies ask, "What are the opposing political forces to that political leader?" You look for a political motive, and we didn't do that in this country. We accepted the cover story right off the bat. And that's all I'm saying. Is if you start to look for the why Kennedy was killed, if you start to look for a motive, then you can begin to look for who and how. And once you look for a motive, given a motive, if you accept that Kennedy was trying to wind down the cold war — and we can discuss that whatever the next segment— if you start to accept that motive, then you start to look for the enemies. Once you find those enemies, it's possible to lead to the same conclusions about Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy.

SAWYER: Let's pause right there. We're going to take a commercial break and continue our discussion.

[The Washington Post poll, 5/91. Did Oswald act alone or was there a conspiracy? Alone, 19%; Consp. acy, 56%; Don't Know, 24%]

[Commercial break]

SAWYER: The film is *JFK*. The writer, producer and director of the film is Oliver Stone.

Oliver, one area where you've got a lot of students of this assassination kicking and screaming and pulling their hair out is your use of Jim Garrison as a central figure in the film. For them, Jim Garrison was a man who ran a shabby investigation, who was laughed out of court by the jurors and who ultimately, they believe, may actually have set back raising questions because it was so laughable. Now, do you think he's just been misjudged by history?

Mr. STONE: I admire Jim Garrison. I think he was an underdog, I think he was fighting an impossible situation. He was trying to run an espionage trial against the U.S. government in the light of day. I think that as late as the 1980s, we still see the same problem in the Lawrence Walsh investigation into people like Oliver North and Richard Secord and the Iran/Contra plotters.

His subpoenas to Allen Dulles and Richard Helms in Washington, which were key elements in his trial, were squashed. His files were stolen, his offices were bugged. The press was against him in a highly doubtful documentary done on NBC which— well, we don't have time for the details, but I don't think that he really got a fair chance, and I think that he was dealing with something which was much too big. In the 1980s, for anybody to attack the government and the CIA and military intelligence's concepts, it was impossible.

SAWYER: But you know the allegations about his being associated with organized crime, you know that one of his witnesses said he fingerprinted his children because he wasn't sure who they were. Another witness was a drug addict, another witness went under hypnosis before he came up with the proper testimony. And the jury as well, what, 50 minutes? Is this the man you want to build the

Jim around?

Mr. STONE: Well, Jim Garrison, as I've said in other interviews, is a metaphor, he's the protagonist. I tried to put all the researchers from the '60s and '70s and the '80s into Jim's case. I took that liberty, that's dramatic license. But I think that Jim's case was flawed in many ways, but he had a lot of good witnesses that identified Shaw and his relationship with Oswald and with Ferrie. Those drug addicts that you talked about, each one has a different history, but you can point to— you know, these were people in the street, these were people that are aware of a conspiracy. They're not necessarily law professors and people in three-piece suits, you know. It's hard to make a case with respectable people sometimes.

SAWYER: Now, you see, it's your use of—

Mr. STONE: However—

SAWYER: —go ahead, I'm sorry.

Mr. STONE: —also, I'd point out that Shaw was in the CIA, this was found out 10 years later. We also know that Shaw perjured himself on the stand, and we know that he knew Oswald and that he knew Ferrie, and there were a lot of solid witnesses that pointed to this. And the research community is— although they castigated Jim at the time for possibly drawing publicity to himself and, you know, blowing open the case, he is the only public official who did bring a prosecution in the murder of John Kennedy. I think he is to be applauded for saying, and being the first one in the United States to say that the Warren Commission was wrong.

SAWYER: All right, we're getting a little lost here. When you refer to Ferrie, that is David Ferrie, a man who was alleged by Garrison to have been involved in the conspiracy. Clay Shaw is the man he brought to trial.

Now, it is your use of dramatic license where again you are hit. This is an area where people begin to go over every detail, every square inch of land, and you do that, too, I mean, you— the meticulous detail that you applied to the Texas Book Depository, even cutting down trees in the line of sight, that sort of thing, and then to mix in the fictionalization, does it get confusing for the viewers so that they don't know what's real?

Mr. STONE: Well, I think it gets confusing for the man who put together the cover of *Newsweek* up saying that, you know, my film can't be trusted. Consider the source. I think the film viewers can make up their own minds. I think the American people are intelligent. The movie is skillfully woven together to put you inside the action so that you're in the 1960s, and you feel Dealey Plaza, it's entertaining, it's a thriller. But I think the American public has seen movies and know what they're about, and they know what's real and what— also in the movie, it's very clear, I think, that when Garrison says, "Let's speculate about— shall we, about the events in Dallas that day?", that's what he says, or his members of his staff say, "What if?" or, "There's a possibility of." For example, there's a shot of Garrison walking through David Ferrie's apartment, he's dead. He looks in the mirror and he sees in black and white four very quick flashbacks of what he thinks may have happened to David Ferrie, that he was

killed. But I think the movie viewer knows that, and knows that that's a speculation.

SAWYER: Well, maybe it's just me, I tell you, you were so skilled at manipulating images and having them come at us that I had trouble knowing what was fact and what was not fact, and when you begin to mix in things like David Ferrie saying that Oswald was an agent — that conversation presumably never happened. You have Garrison delivering a very powerful speech before the jury, that never happened, it was Oliver Stone's words in large part. You have a fellow named X in the government revealing the vast conspiracy, and that conversation actually never happened. You begin then to raise some doubts, I think.

Mr. STONE: Well, I've said— I've said in all three cases, the David Ferrie conversation did happen, Lou Ivon [sp?] witnessed it. His meeting with X, I said did not happen. Donald Sutherland talked to me and I've said that in interviews, and I've written about it, although Jim Garrison did meet with a Deep Throat figure who was a CIA agent and told him some remarkable things. The film is ultimately a hypothesis.

SAWYER: We have just about 25 seconds and I know this has gone awfully fast, but in the end, through all of this controversy, what would you like to have come out of this?

Mr. STONE: If these critics feel so secure with their truth, why don't we let the American public see it? Let the files out. Let's start with the House files, from the '70s, Mr. Blakey's files. And let's move on to the intelligence files, the military intelligence files, the CIA files and the FBI files. Let the American— trust the American people with the truth and with their history.

SAWYER: Oliver Stone, producer, writer, director of *JFK*. You're very kind to talk to us on such a busy night. Thank you.

Mr. STONE: Thank you.

SAWYER: We'll be back with a program note in just a moment.

[Commercial break]

SAWYER: Tomorrow on 20/20, a report on how the mayor of the whitest city in America is recruiting minorities to live there.

That is our report for tonight. I'm Farrest Sawyer in New York, and for all of us here at ABC News, good night.

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