

SF WEEKLY

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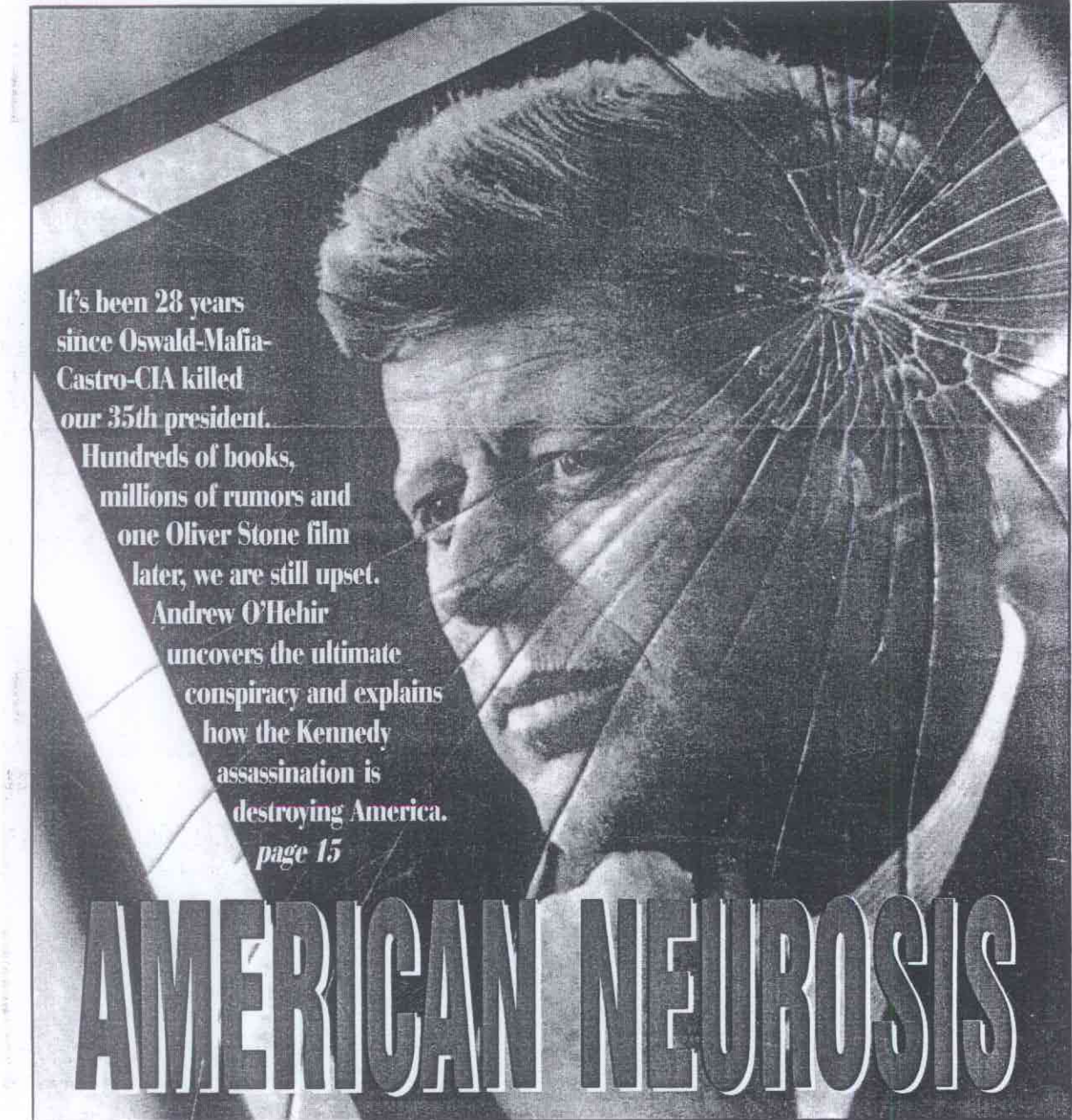
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since Oswald-Mafia-
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Hundreds of books,
millions of rumors and
one Oliver Stone film
later, we are still upset.
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AMERICAN NEUROSIS



JFK:

Tragedy Into Farce

Death in Dallas, Jackie's dress and the decline of America

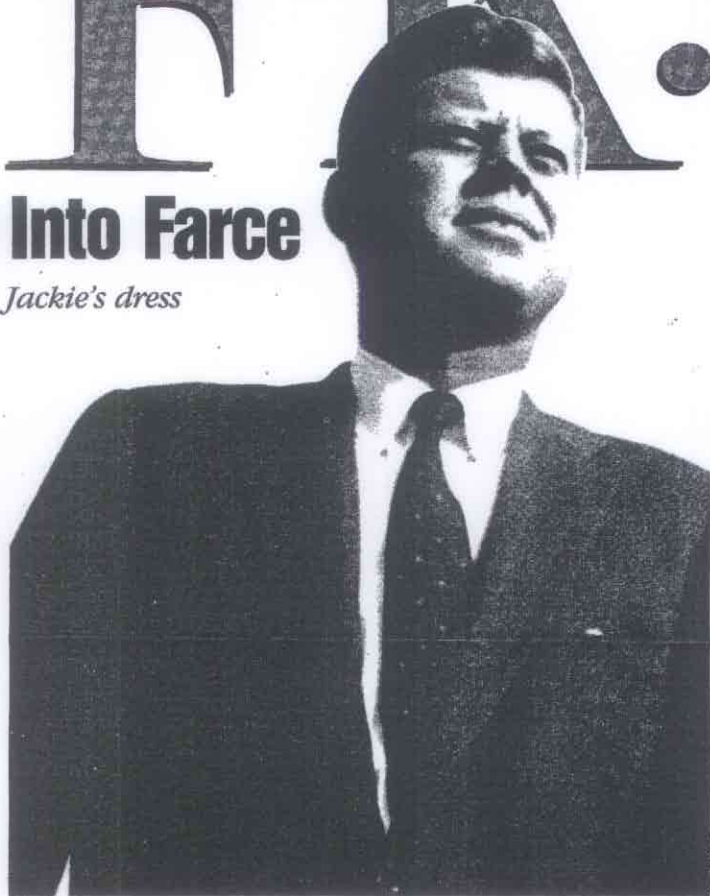
By Andrew O'Hehir

HISTORIANS TALK ABOUT the American Century, but it barely lasted 20 years. If the sound of Zeros at dawn over Pearl Harbor awoke the clumsy American colossus to its new role as world leader, the sound of rifle fire in Dealey Plaza signaled the beginning of its irreversible decline.

Centuries from now they will write that America, born in the bloodshed of genocide, began to die with one solitary blood sacrifice. The mid-century social consensus, the shared faith in progress that had been passed from FDR to Truman to Ike, was exploded in an instant, all its trapped internal contradictions rushing to the surface like noxious gases pouring from an erupting volcano.

Anyone who studies the photographic record of November 22, 1963, is haunted by one image above others: the dazed Jacqueline Kennedy, wearing a blank stare and a pink suit still smeared with her husband's blood, standing alongside Lyndon Johnson in Air Force One as he takes the oath of office. Three hours earlier she was a society wife, playing the role of loyal helpmate to her vain, philandering, patrician social-democrat husband. But at that fateful moment she was America, transfixed by history, too numb to try to wash away the bloodstains. It was a moment of truth, a hole in the fabric of time, when we caught a glimpse of our nation's real and terrible legacy before looking away again.

No living human knows precisely what strange scenario reached its climax in that crucial six seconds in Dallas. Three or more shots were fired by one or more assailants; a man died. Beyond that, impenetrable layers of lies, death, idiocy, incompetence and psychosis have made the "truth" about John Fitzgerald Kennedy's death literally unknowable. But there are further truths. On another level, we all know exactly what happened: Things went "wrong," Planet America rolled off its axis, mere anarchy was loosed upon the world. Another truth is that we don't need or want to know who killed Kennedy; we need the JFK assassination as a nightmarish religious vision, a dark shrine for self-flagellating worship, a negative miracle as mysterious as the Holy Ghost or the doctrine of transubstantiation.



Fallen Boy-King: Revelations of John F. Kennedy's personal peccadillos haven't dulled his mysterious luster or cooled the fever of conspiracy theorists.

All this has little to do with Kennedy the man, however we judge his presidential record or the hilarious and alarming accomplishments of his private life. JFK's Camelot was a shared illusion, a structure of belief; if the gunfire in Dallas hadn't shattered it, something else would have. Our national fixation on the assassination relates to John Kennedy's life in the same way that the apocalyptic fervor of Christian fundamentalism reflects the life of Yeshua, the Jewish carpenter from Nazareth.

JFK is an American obsession as deep as baseball, a field of bad dreams littered with esoteric terminology, statistical minutiae and strange symbols, an intellectual morass as complex and frustrating as the interpretation of scripture. The devil, in this case, is definitely in the admittedly seductive details.

Why is a man standing under an open umbrella on that sunny Dallas day? What are the enigmatic shapes on the "grassy knoll"? (If you seek a superabundance of answers to this question, there is actually a bimonthly publication called the *Grassy Knoll*

Gazette.) What about the pristine "magic bullet" found on John Connally's stretcher that supposedly went through Kennedy's throat, then changed direction and wounded the Texas governor? Was Lee Harvey Oswald a CIA stooge, a KGB plant or a Mafia hireling? (Oswald's corpse was exhumed in 1981 at the behest of especially ghoulish assassination buffs; disappointingly, he turned out to be himself after all.) Did the "three tramps" briefly detained near Dealey Plaza include convicted hitman Charles V. Harrelson (father of Woody on *Cheers*) and/or future Watergate burglar E. Howard Hunt? Was the presidential casket that left Parkland Memorial Hospital that afternoon the same one that came off the plane at Andrews Air Force Base in the evening? Where is Kennedy's brain?

That way lies madness, to be sure. But when it's this exciting, who needs sanity? Those who are enraged at Oliver Stone's film *JFK* for its heavily fictionalized blending of various assassination theories are missing the point. As Stone has apparently grasped in his blockhead populist

way, the JFK killing has been fiction for a long time. It's the creation myth we use to understand the discords of contemporary America; the tale of the fall from grace, for which we keep vainly seeking redemption. If it hadn't happened, we would have had to invent it.

OUR LOVABLE LOUT of a nation arrived late to the modern age, like a hayseed soldier putting his boots on the table at a distinguished Parisian nightclub. But we made up for lost time at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Bomb not only vaporized and mutilated thousands of human beings, it unwittingly launched the era of international cultural dislocation that came to be called postmodernism.

This had far-reaching consequences, to be sure, although they weren't obvious right away. Our cavity-free, milk-fed children, their bodies made strong in 12 ways by Wonder Bread, thenceforward slept in the darkening shadow of the mushroom cloud. From generals to artists, we all grew up addicted to the nuclear threat. Years later we would realize that our bombs had conceived a new Japan in our own im-

age, a Japan dedicated to taking over and surpassing our once-triumphant ideological blend of narcissism and capital.

But it was on that autumn day in Dallas that postmodernism came home to roost. Dallas seemed like a magic trick, or the culmination of some elaborate practical joke; it traumatized us because we couldn't figure out how it worked. We still feel sure that if we go through it *one more time*, we'll see the concealed wires leading to the book depository window, spot the clown on the grassy knoll, decode the umbrella man's secret message. But it's always the same stale pie in our face, all over again.

The Kennedy killing was obviously more than an "ordinary" political assassination. It was also more than a metaphorical loss of innocence, which is how it appears in countless movies and TV commercials. Metaphor is a cold construction of Hellenic logic, while what happened November 22, 1963, in Dallas was a ritual event of the most profound order, a reshaping of our national paradigm.

Many Americans, even those too young to remember the event, see the Kennedy assassination as the trigger that released all the perceived disorder of the last three decades. Vietnam; the race riots and white flight; Bobby, Martin and Malcolm; the '68 Democratic convention; the Panthers; People's Park; Kent State; Attica; Nixon and Watergate; Jonestown; Moscone and Milk; the Tehran embassy; the Beirut Marine barracks; crack; AIDS; homelessness; Iran-Contra; the Persian Gulf.

If we could run the Zapruder film in reverse, patch up the President's gruesome head wound, send the bullets flying back to the chambers whence they came, return the assassins to their sinister underworld, and back up the Lincoln convertible so that Jack and Jackie are once again waving to the crowds in the Texas sunshine, then we could also walk backwards through the last 30 years, becoming younger and more hopeful, forgetting tragedies one after another, arriving finally at a point of innocent stasis where we can stand forever watching the American sunrise with immortal delight. But we can't.

Our Puritan legacy has left us a people with a taste for absolute doctrine, be it religious or secular, from the right or the left. We prefer a pure visionary flame, an illumination of history as a mystically unified field, to an acceptance of life as a complex of vagaries, accidents and random cross-currents. All good assassination theories seek to interlink, with Jesuitical precision, as much recent historical turmoil as possible. Psychologically, the reasons for this are clear. If the central villainous conspiracy of our time — headed up, let's say, by Bush, Nixon, LBJ, Bill Casey and J. Edgar Hoover — has had its dark tentacles everywhere for 30 years, then the disastrous condition of America today is *not our fault*.

OLIVER STONE has largely accepted the thesis advanced by former New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, who argues that the JFK killing was essentially a right-wing coup d'état staged by the CIA and the military. This is certainly the intuitive belief of many Americans; it might even contain elements of the truth. But our pursuit of the answers is so fervid, so pathological, that no truth will ever be complete enough to satisfy us.

Garrison, a noted mob confidant who was diagnosed as mentally unbalanced while in the Army, is one short step away from people who've been abducted by aliens, or who see an immense network of Satanic covers beneath suburbia. His CIA plot is plausible, but as Robert Sam Anson *zeta* continued on next page

Lonely crusader

Paul Kangas on the mother of all conspiracy theories

P AUL KANGAS PULLS UP for an interview in an old green Volvo with a message in the window: "JAIL BUSH FOR THE MURDER OF JFK. See the photos 55." He's wearing a T-shirt that says the same thing. "The hats are coming next week," he announces. These are exciting days for the beleaguered brotherhood of assassination buffs. For three decades they've bucked the official conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. For Kangas, the release of Oliver Stone's movie is reason to work even harder at getting out the message he's been stenciling on San Francisco sidewalks and plastering on walls for years: "CIA KILLED JFK." At last, he believes, the public may be ready to listen.

With satisfaction, Kangas points to *Life* magazine's cover story on the movie, which notes at one point that "even Stone does not go as far as some others, who trace a CIA plot from the Bay of Pigs to Watergate to George Bush."

"They're talking about me," he says. "I wish they'd used my name." Kangas is a balding private investigator with a neatly curved mustache and an equivocal smile. He's successful at lining up reluctant witnesses for defense attorneys. And he's infamous for President John F. Kennedy's murder was no aberrant act of a lone misfit. His smile is the defense of a long-suffering man used to disbelief.

"The CIA killed Kennedy because he failed to support the invasion of Cuba and was planning to end Vietnam," he says from behind the smile. "Nixon was involved. Bush was involved. The shooters were E. Howard Hunt and Frank Sturgis, the same guys who broke into Democratic National Headquarters 10 years later. Watergate was a failed attempt to get incriminating evidence about the assassination away from the Democrats." Kangas has photocopies of an article placing Richard Nixon in Dallas on November 22, 1963. Nixon denied this to the FBI. "He lied to the FBI," Kangas says. "He was there at a planning meeting for the assassination."

Kangas has an FBI document that shows Jack Ruby worked for Nixon as early as 1947. He has a White House memo dated October 11, 1963, which refers to plans to withdraw 1,000 troops from Vietnam by the end of that year. He has a copy of a memo from J. Edgar Hoover dated a week after the assassination referring to "Mr. George Bush of the CIA" and his familiarity with anti-Castro Cubans in Miami.

The Kangas scenario goes like this: Nixon's ties to the Bush family date from 1941 when George's father Preston Bush recruited young Dick to run for Congress. Preston Bush's group later put together the Eisenhower-Nixon ticket.

The Preston Bush group had by 1960 two key goals, Kangas believes: restore a pro-business government to Cuba and promote anti-communist wars, as in Vietnam, to make profitable work for the military-industrial complex. Kennedy resisted both ideas; Dallas was the result.

The CIA put Texas oil millionaire George Bush in charge of recruiting Cuban exiles for an invasion of their homeland. Frank Sturgis emerged from the exile group. Sturgis was a former Cuban official who would appear first with E. Howard Hunt as part of the assassination team at Dallas and a decade later again with Hunt at the Watergate offices of the Democratic National Committee.

The Watergate burglary was an attempt to retrieve incriminating pictures taken by news photographers in Dallas immediately after the assassination. The pictures show Sturgis and Hunt, disguised as tramps, under arrest by Dallas police. Kangas' copies of the photos come complete with transparent overlays of Sturgis and Hunt designed to confirm their identification.

Kangas has devised a board game he calls "Dallas 1963" to help people understand the bewildering elements in the plot. "Roll the dice," the instructions read. "Try to slip JFK past the Grassy Knoll before the CIA assassins move into place!"

JOHN ROEMER

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JFK

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logged in his excellent *Esquire* cover story, it was one of 14 different hypothetical conspiracies Garrison had worked out, some of which featured the gay underground, the Dallas Police Department and Czarist Russians. He also believes there were nine gunmen in Dealey Plaza, including some firing from the sewer drains. (The umbrella man was shooting poisoned darts.) Once you develop a theory, there are no philosophical limits to its growth.

Forteen plots and nine assassins obviously present a more fertile imaginative field than the bleak, rocky landscape of Lee Harvey Oswald's paranoid psychology (which strongly resembles the maladjusted stereotype of the conspiracy theorist). And the point is no longer to solve JFK's murder, if indeed it ever was. The point is to interpret the assassination to fit our particular dysfunctional world view; to prove to ourselves that there is order to the universe and that we understand it, even if others refuse to.

Stone speaks of himself in interviews as Hamlet trying to solve the mystery of his father's death, or as Shakespeare altering the outlines of English history to fit *Henry V*. As pompous as these analogies are, they underline the grotesque appropriateness of his project. America *does* imagine itself, like Hamlet, the damaged heir to a noble legacy; if we can make JFK conform to the dimensions of tragedy rather than of cruel and amoral farce, we will be avenged, and our angst relieved.

Even more importantly, we need to be able to read history as a *story*. Shakespeare's *Henry V* has a clear conflict, a dramatic resolution and a moral, along with ethnic jokes and a romantic subplot (whereas the historical Henry's French campaign was a bitter and pointless massacre, inspired by competing interpretations of an arcane treaty). Like the other main conspiracy theories, Garrison's has a strong narrative element: good guys (Jack and his innermost circle, except Lyndon) tricked by omnipotent and ruthlessly efficient bad guys (too numerous to mention); the hapless nation, left victimized and fatherless, destroying itself in paroxysms of grief; the intrepid investigator (Garrison, now played by Kevin Costner) who will lay bare the truth, and achieve mystical reunion between father and child.

Oliver Stone readily admits that he's trying to find out why he got so

fucked up in Vietnam, his contention being that had Kennedy lived, the war would not have continued long. That issue itself is problematic, but never mind. The real point is that we have all been fucked up by post-1963 life in declining America. We are searching our collective past for that one traumatic event, in the same way that therapist and neurotic patient scour the rocks of memory for the childhood horror that can explain everything. America's trauma is real enough. But it doesn't stem from some dramatic cataclysm, from shadowy figures with guns arrayed among the storm drains and shade trees of Dealey Plaza. Its source is the untheatrical, non-narrative slow grind of history. There's nothing intoxicating about this trauma; it just hangs around us like fetid gas in the air.

grieve, as no other event has before or since. History suggests that an earlier and far different nation went through a crucial period of self-examination when Grant and Lee met at Appomattox Court House, when Lincoln spoke at Gettysburg, when John Wilkes Booth entered the presidential box at Ford's Theatre. That troubled republic reassessed itself and went forward; but the psychological and physical violence that has ravaged America over the past three decades makes the Civil War of the 1860s look refreshingly straightforward.

We'll never know who killed John Kennedy. But we know enough. We know that our myth-making zealotry has made every theory valid and every preposterous scenario true. We know that Kennedy's death was overdetermined; we have concocted a thou-



Blood-Stained Moment Lady Bird, LBJ and Jackie stare into history as Johnson takes the oath.

If you like morals, late 20th-century American life certainly offers them. You can say that the bad karma from our national sins — the slaughter of the Indians, the arrival of the slave ships, imperialism, international corporate capitalism — has been visited upon us. Or that the loss of faith, either in meaningful spirituality or in science, has driven us insane; as the empire crumbles, we cling to our pantheon of martyred deities: Bogart, Marilyn, James Dean, Elvis, the Kennedys. Our republic's unresolved tensions, long held in check by a combination of forcible oppression and the unfulfilled but still-exciting promise of liberty for all, have emerged as gaping fissures that now threaten to tear the continent apart. In some ways, it's miraculous they took so long.

The Kennedy assassination was a moment when we caught a glimpse of our republic's demise. Ironically, it also brought Americans together to

sand reasons why it happened. But we haven't faced the chill reality of Jackie's bloodstained suit, her shocked gaze meeting the eyes of posterity. Her husband's blood was our only way of witnessing, and lamenting, the blood of the Algonquin, of the African, of the Iraqi children not yet born. We are all conspirators in those deaths, and without the sickness they engendered, we would have had neither Kennedy's assassination nor our demented fascination with it.

We can no longer use JFK as a crutch, if our democracy is to survive. We created JFK, and killed him, to evade responsibility for the worsening calamity of America, and the calamities America has inflicted on the world. To survive, we need to walk away from the quagmire of Dallas. To walk away, we first need to stand still for a few moments, staring at ourselves in the camera lens, and feel the blood soak through our clothes. ■

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