

'JFK' inaccurate, relentless, flat

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Oliver Stone's "JFK," a three-hour and 10-minute probe of the assassination of President Kennedy, opens with real footage of President Eisenhower's farewell address, in which he talks about the dangers of a "military-industrial complex."

Eisenhower's warning is Mr. Stone's springboard for his own conspiracy theory about Kennedy's death, which he unspools during the course of this compelling and controversial movie.

The Kennedy assassination is one of our most perplexing mysteries. Few Americans accept the Warren Commission's official finding that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. But Mr. Stone offers little concrete evidence to support his theories, and even creates factual errors.

Based on the books "On the Trail of the Assassins," by Jim Garrison, and "Crossfire: The Plot That Killed Kennedy," by Jim Marrs, the screenplay by Mr. Stone and Zachary Sklar contends that the military, CIA and corporate defense contractors had John Kennedy killed because he planned to pull out of Vietnam, dismantle the CIA

and was "soft" on communism.

Mr. Stone's champion is Mr. Garrison (Kevin Costner), the former New Orleans district attorney who tried a local businessman, Clay Shaw (Tommy Lee Jones), on charges he conspired to kill the president.

Mr. Stone launches a relentless cinematic attack. The motorcade is shown dozens of times from every angle, in every speed, in color, in black and white, with sound, without sound. Mr. Stone pounds it home again and again like some sort of mantra: believe, believe, believe.

He stages the assassination with three different teams of shooters — some in the school book depository, some on the "grassy knoll," some behind a fence. We also see the sickening underbelly of New Orleans' rough trade, Jack Ruby shooting Oswald, secret meetings in the Pentagon, and questionable White House alliances.

Mr. Stone tries to prove that Kennedy was on the brink of making some wonderful changes for a better society. The facts — and history — do not support his thesis.

There is little evidence that Kennedy planned to withdraw from Vietnam. Mr. Stone says he did.

There is little evidence linking the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. Mr. Stone suggests there's a definite connection.

"We knew the Warren Commission was fiction," says Donald Sutherland, who portrays Mr. X, a former Pentagon official. "The organizing principle of any society is war. If Kennedy withdrew the United States from Vietnam, then industrial America loses." The Kennedy assassination, he says, was a "coup d'etat."

Mr. Stone's theory of this coup becomes a tangle of deceit that also involves the Mafia, Cuba, the Dallas police department, the press, Lyndon Johnson and the Warren Commission.

"JFK" revolves around the celebrated trial of Clay Shaw — who was acquitted — and Mr. Garrison's obsessive dedication to proving a Kennedy conspiracy. Mr. Garrison himself puts in a cameo as Earl Warren.

Unfortunately, Mr. Costner is not very compelling in the film's key role. As the driven DA, he simply isn't forceful enough to maintain the movie's focus.

"JFK," which opens Friday, is rated R.