

# With 'JFK,' filmmaker Oliver Stone shows he

Oliver Stone, director of the movie *JFK*, would like it to be taken seriously as film art (he compares himself to the Shakespeare of the history plays) or as revisionist history — or both. He's offended that many commentators and critics dismiss it as fantasy, and has retained a Washington public relations firm to contest their verdict.

It's money wasted, for many reasons. Stone has chosen as his improbable hero the crank district attorney Jim Garrison, whose trumped-up case against New Orleans businessman Clay Shaw (according to Garrison, one of the key plotters of the Kennedy assassination) was thrown out of court in 1967 in one hour flat and never revived.

The message of *JFK*, built of sly and fragmentary insinuations, is clear: President Kennedy was shot in Dallas Nov. 22, 1963, by conspirators acting on behalf of the "military-industrial complex" and the CIA. Kennedy was showing signs of softness on communism, planning to withdraw troops from Vietnam. He had also signed a treaty with Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet leader, to ban atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons.

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Assume, for the sake of argument, that Stone's bizarre theory of the Kennedy assassination is plausible enough on its face to warrant examination in context. What then?

As Tom Wicker of the New York Times has noted, no one knew in November 1963 what John Kennedy planned to do in Vietnam. The undecideds probably included Kennedy himself. The troop commitment was still small and flexible; and there was no open American engagement in combat. After Kennedy's death, his idolaters sought to establish that,

unlike Lyndon Johnson, he would have avoided the Vietnam quagmire.

Maybe so; but the contention is unsupported myth. Kennedy had endorsed the nationalist rebellion against French rule in Algeria in 1958, a small clue that he might have been more sensitive than Johnson to the complexities of the struggle in Indochina. But we know why Johnson deepened the war; and it had nothing to do with supposed servitude to "military-industrial" conspirators. He believed he had to wage the war as a precondition of getting his Great Society domestic program supported and funded by congressional conservatives.

It is also a well-established fact that Kennedy accepted, as Johnson and many others did, the master premise of American policy in Asia — that China was an aggressive, expansive power; and that an American "failure" in Asia, in Vietnam or elsewhere, would incite further aggression and adventure.

Kennedy's American University speech in summer 1963 (of which much is made by conspiracy theorists) was not evidence of pacifist intent. It was a gesture of concilia-

## isn't up to the job of historian

tion stemming from the Cuban missile crisis of the previous autumn. Kennedy and Khrushchev had peered over the brink at nuclear war and decided there had to be a better way to wage the Cold War, if cold war was to be waged.

The same mood provided the setting for the August 1963 atmospheric-test-ban treaty. Again, that treaty imposed no constraint on the number or quality of American nuclear weapons, and was endorsed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and congressional conservatives (notably Sen. Richard Russell of Georgia, influential chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee). The radioactive isotope Strontium-90 from testing fallout was poisoning the world's milk supply and threatening millions of children, everywhere, with bone cancer and leukemia.

In short, the circumstantial events upon which Stone and others erect a lurid theory of the Kennedy assassination are more clearly and plausibly explained by other motives. These latter motives have the defect of being, as the real world often is, undramatic, random and sometimes dull.

Still another flaw in Stone's theory is the insinuation that the CIA would have collaborated to kill a dovish Kennedy. Many in the CIA were personal and social friends of the president, loyal to him and his outlook. The CIA's views on Vietnam, insofar as they conformed to any pattern, were skeptical — so persistently skeptical as later to incur the displeasure of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon.

These are the historical realities that Stone stretches and caricatures in *JFK* to support his own theories. As an artist, he has that privilege. As one who claims to be reporting history, he has no such license. This film may be good entertainment, but the mischief is that thousands or millions of gullible moviegoers too young to remember or too lazy to read their history may mistake *JFK* for truth. Historically considered, it is in fact sensationalist claptrap.

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