

BELTWAY BANDITS.

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X-Men and J.F.K.

If you are sick of Oliver Stone's *JFK*, turn the page. It may be late, but—as someone who has spent years researching the C.I.A.'s anti-Cuba campaign of the 1960s, during which I have reviewed thousands of pages of government documents and interviewed C.I.A. officers directly involved—allow me to pile on. The secret war on Cuba figures prominently in Stone's conspiracy theory that U.S. military officers, intelligence operatives and freelance anti-Communists plotted, with L.B.J.'s O.K., to kill Kennedy because he was softening on Communism. In a let-me-spell-it-out-for-you scene, a fictitious former Pentagon official who calls himself X tells Kevin Costner that after the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion, an upset Kennedy yanked away the C.I.A.'s covert action responsibility and handed it to a General Y in the Pentagon. General Y then ran the anti-Castro program, code-named Operation Mongoose, and in doing so developed a paramilitary capability that was later turned against the President. The general is not named, but there is a quick shot of his desk. However—damn!—the nameplate is obscured by a plant. A few letters, though, are visible. The name, I recall, seems to start with an "L" and end with "LE."

In real life, the chief of Mongoose was Gen. Edward Lansdale, a former ad man who in the 1950s ran creative and sometimes nutty counterinsurgency programs in Asia and the Pacific. In late 1961 he was handed the Cuban account by John and Robert Kennedy, who were exasperated with a C.I.A. that had not yet rid them of the turbulent Castro. Lansdale drafted unrealistic schedules for Mongoose, an interagency program, and dictated that a certain number of agents be in place in time to organize a revolution against Castro in October 1962. But Lansdale was a general without troops, a super-bureaucrat; the main operations against Castro were being conducted by a large C.I.A. unit managed by William Harvey, a gun-toting, hard-drinking ex-F.B.I. man.

Mongoose never amounted to much. There were a few attempted raids, some economic sabotage and some money passed to Cuban exiles, but the project was hampered by high-level policy-makers who dickered over just how far the agency could go. Throughout months of handwringing, though, Bobby Kennedy, who represented his brother, called for more action. Mongoose was ended by the Cuban missile crisis in 1962—but not because, as X says, Kennedy had promised Khrushchev he would leave Cuba alone. The Kennedy Administration wanted a fresh start. Lansdale and Harvey were boot-ed out. Contrary to Stone's movie, Lansdale had not come to head a covert, Pentagon-based paramilitary unit that could blow away a U.S. President. It was Harvey who had been in charge of the attempt to use mob-linked assets to assassinate Castro. Lansdale resigned from the military on October 31, 1963, and took a post with the Food for Peace program. He also devoted time to pressing his view that the key to victory in Vietnam was not to dump large amounts of troops and money into the country—and enrich the military-industrial complex—but to develop counterinsurgency and civic action programs to capture Vietnamese "hearts and minds."

After the missile crisis, C.I.A. operations against Cuba continued. In 1963 the agency, following J.F.K.'s wishes, directed commando strikes against the island and provided money and weapons to rebels who had set up bases in Central America from which they could attack Cuba. Federal officers did apprehend anti-Castro freebooters who were not working with the agency, and this crackdown annoyed exiles already disappointed that Kennedy had not invaded Cuba during the crisis. But the secret war was still on.

In the fall of 1963, Kennedy transmitted the slightest peace feelers, but at the same time agency actions were picking up. The point is, Kennedy never went soft on Castro and while some rabid anti-Castro Cuban exiles may have thought their crusade would be helped by Kennedy's assassination, Mongoose and its demise could not have provided General Y the means or motive for bumping off Kennedy. In fact, Kennedy's murder rang the death knell of the secret war on Cuba. Soon after Johnson took office, the word passed through the Company: The new commander wasn't interested in Castro. C.I.A. paramilitary activities against Fidel came to a halt.

Everybody Must Get Stoned

Stone's treatment of history parallels the Christic Institute approach. Ever since I wrote in these pages that journalist Danny Casolaro, who was found dead last summer, was influenced by Christic's "silly 'secret team' theory," many outraged Christic supporters have written to demand an explanation. To be brief, Christic's S.S.T. theory holds that a small band of military and intelligence officials have in the past three decades hijacked and perverted U.S. foreign policy notes—somewhat accurately—that the same people have been involved in the anti-Castro program, the secret war in Laos, covert activity in Vietnam, the Iran initiative, the *contra* support program and other shady national security episodes. This coterie was not running the show. It was implementing decisions made by a series of Presidents and, in most cases, supported by the entire national security bureaucracy. A conspiracy of underhanded operatives makes for a better story (someone even put out a secret-team comic book) but, in any case, it does not illuminate reality. Stone and the Christics are obsessed with an important topic: covert government activities. Stone does deserve two cheers for reminding people that government lies (cf. the Warren Commission). But forcing twisting facts into comic-book format should not be confused with promoting truth.

Out With the New

Discerning the campaign message of Bob Kerrey, wondering whatever happened to the S&L crisis, pondering the impact of Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger's past business dealings (he was a director of two major oil and slav companies before he took this post) on U.S. policy toward the Serb-Croat civil war—all while buying social hard work. So I'm off on a two-month leave to pursue pressing matters. This column will resume in April.