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Lurid tales from the grassy knoll



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JFK movie touches a still-throbbing nerve

By Robert Spiegelman

A specter is haunting America: the ghost of the unresolved political assassinations of the '60s. Exhibit A is the unprecedented media controversy over Oliver Stone's "JFK," the offspring of 25 years of evidence and public opinion polls that defy the Warren Commission's credo: Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, killed John F. Kennedy.

Although the public shift from lone-nut to conspiracy-centered explanation is well underway, no "smoking gun" has yet nailed the exact conspirators. This gap has allowed media heavies like Tom Wicker and Walter Cronkite to keep the burden of proof on the conspiracy claimants by denouncing critics' lack of absolute proof and maintaining silence on the way murdered eyewitnesses (like Lee Bower); disappeared evidence (like JFK's brain); and, especially, the thousands of still-classified (most until 2029 and beyond) documents all combine to preclude proof.

"JFK" combats this ruse. It cites the deaths and the evidence and urges people to demand full disclosure of the quarantined documents and total access to our real history.

In fact, "JFK" ups the ante even further. Marshalling the available evidence, Stone hypothesizes that Kennedy's death was no tragic happenstance, but a coup d'état. As an outlaw history, a radical populist manifesto, "JFK" is incendiary cinema.

No stone unturned



With access to a worldwide audience of millions, Stone appears to have become dangerous. Unable to ignore the film, the media have taken to massive damage control. Stone has been almost universally vilified as "paranoid" and even "treason" or "rewriting" history and resurrecting the (albeit, "credited" Garrison case.

The heart of "JFK" is Stone's inquiry into the motive for the Kennedy assassination. In the course of that inquiry, Stone openly mines New Orleans' District Attorney Jim Garrison's prosecution of alleged conspirator Clay Shaw; his subsequent discoveries and two more decades of research, and comes up with a possible explanation: Kennedy, he asserts, was not the ironclad cold warrior remembered by many, but a nascent peacemaker who obstructed CIA, Pentagon and corporate priorities.

"JFK" holds that by early 1963, having gone through both the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban missile crisis, Kennedy had started to abandon the then 16-year-old Cold War and arms race. He resisted the drive for a second Cuba invasion and military expansion in Southeast Asia.

Stone's version of the assassinated president's last four months show an embryonic new approach: detente. Kennedy deploys FBI teams to close Langley's illegal U.S. paramilitary bases. He establishes the hot line, signs the first-ever nuclear test ban with Khrushchev and OKs secret talks with Castro. Then he authorizes a 1,000-troop pull-out in Vietnam and tells aides he'll withdraw completely after winning the '64 elections. With re-election likely, JFK is now perceived by opponents as a usurper whose maverick views endanger the military-industrial complex, which activates cadres in Washington, New Orleans and Dallas to suppress the peace scare.

Media casts first stone



But "JFK" implies even deeper sources of conspiracy by "naming names" that merit further investigation. Witness its logo-images of PepsiCo, Esso and United Fruit Company (to clarify Big Business's "Cuba problem"); its identification of Warren Commissioner John McCloy as a board member (at the time) of Chase Manhattan Bank; and its citing of Bell Helicopter, General Dynamics and First National Bank of Boston as major Vietnam war profiteers.

The film's deep throat figure, General "X," cajoles viewers (through Garrison) to trace who benefited, and ask who owns these companies. Other clues pose a General "Y" as possible assassination coordinator: His first and middle initials are "E.G.," and he administered the infamous Operation Mongoose, America's covert war against Castro. (Keep looking, he's real.)

To date, an eight-month media war has pilloried Stone as a father-obsessed paranoid who "rewrites history" and exploits the discredited Garrison conspiracy case. In June, former FBI-er and longtime assassination buff Harold Weisberg replayed Deep Throat by ferreting an obsolete draft

of "JFK" to the Washington Post's national security reporter, George Lardner. Not content with accusing Stone of exploiting tragedy and falsifying history, Lardner divulged both the film's premise and its ending (since changed). Lardner's piece signalled an unprecedented coast-to-coast media campaign to discredit a project barely four weeks into production.

By the time opening day approached, the "JFK" watch had reached red alert: Newsweek's cover shrieked: "The Twisted Truth of 'JFK': Why Oliver Stone's New Movie Can't Be Trusted." Ex-Warren Commissioners Gerald Ford and Arlen Specter (of Thomas-Hill fame) intoned that "JFK" was "pure fiction."

At the brink of censorship, The New York Times' liberal paragon, Tom Wicker, decried the film's potential impact: "In an era when mistrust of government and loss of confidence in institutions (the press not the least) are widespread and virulent," Wicker branded Stone's thesis as a heresy that "if widely accepted, would be contemptuous of the constitutional government Mr. Stone's film purports to uphold." Shortly thereafter, Bernard Weinraub, also of The Times, crossed the censorship barrier with reports on Hollywood's "fear" that Warner let "JFK" go "too far."

The Stone-bashing may yet backfire; when the film finally opened, the first weekend grossed \$5 million and reached 670,000 viewers. Most film critics denounced the film's version of the conspiracy but bowed to Stone's virtuosic filmmaking. Dissenting from that view, however, Vincent Canby of The New York Times played on readers' educational insecurities by warning that Stone's information "jumble" is so "insurmountable" that most "uninformed" audience members will be "exhausted and bored" by the time of Shaw's trial.

Hardly. As drama, "JFK" is compelling, featuring Kevin Costner's solid and affecting Jim Garrison and stunning cameo turns by Donald Sutherland as General X, Ed Asner as Guy Bannister and Joe Pesci as anti-Castro agent David Ferrie. Gary Oldman's portrayal of Oswald is uncanny, while Tommy Lee Jones as the patrician Shaw is both audacious and nuanced.

Cracking the lone nut



Despite Canby's hatchet job, "JFK" rivets factually and visually as well. While its multi-layered evidence is often presented in rapid-fire words and images, the central dramatic line and core arguments are boldly etched, deftly repeated and very available. The details cannot be fully digested in one screening, but this is no "jumble" and, Canby notwithstanding, the audience learns. Repeated viewings are in fact rewarded by unfolding new data, imagery and nuance.

Set against the subliminal montages of preconscious, staccato images are two remarkable monologues that recap and synthesize the film's historical and ethical basis. One, General X's deep throat exposé, is a chilling history of America's covert interventions that links these operations to Kennedy's ambush.

The other, Garrison's trial summation, is radicalized Frank Capra, a populist call to democracy. This "Mr. Smith" decries a coup d'état, indicts the Warren Report as our reigning Big Lie, critiques the file embargo that withholds our history, and fatefully links the assassinations of John Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, whose opposition to the Vietnam War was serially snuffed by the ubiquitous lone nut. To fathom this, Costner whispers its name—"fascism"; to change it, he invokes the Declaration of Independence as authority to overthrow tyranny. Then, to the jury/audience: "It's up to you."

One flaw in the film, however, is its images of women, gays and Blacks. Sissy Spacek's performance as Liz Garrison can grate as a mainly one-note neglected housewife and mother trying to preserve her domestic world against her husband's mania and the forces unleashed by his iron commitment. The conflict, nevertheless, is clearly real. Spacek's performance, moreover, is balanced by Laurie Metcalf's stronger Susie, a tough investigator who readily holds her own whether in cursing or intellect. And Liz herself is potent in accusing Jim of prosecuting Shaw because he's homosexual, and demanding whether Jim has ever considered how Shaw—close to being outed—might actually feel. With convincing anguish, Liz identifies with Shaw as victim of her husband's local power and monomania.

Nevertheless, contrary to rumor, "JFK" neither pins Kennedy's murder on a gay cabal, nor does it gay-bash. Stone's repeated display of Shaw's documented sado-



Kevin Costner as former New Orleans D.A. Jim Garrison

masochism may be gratuitous, but Garrison's drive to uncover Shaw's alias as Clay Bertrand is central both to the drama and to his case. Garrison (in the film as in real life) isn't trying to "out" Shaw, but to link him—through the alias—to Oswald and Ferrie in the assassination plot. Ferrie's closet homosexuality is shown as a trait that the CIA can exploit to do its bidding.

Breaking new ground



Blacks in the film appear principally as the Garrisons' maid Mattie, as participants in the Shaw trial and in Mardi Gras scenes, and as prisoners in some stunningly brutal sequences at Louisiana's Angola Penitentiary. Visual references to Malcolm X and particularly to Martin Luther King both complete the quartet of assassinated leaders and give Mattie her best line, when she cries out, "It's lynchin' time!" at TV reports of King's murder. Additional militant imagery, however, would better represent the era.

Despite these flaws, "JFK" is ground-breaking. It challenges Hollywood's apolitically correct, narcotizing functions. It is clearly energizing popular political debate. It spurs another generation to question authority. It provides a potential opening for further progressive or revisionist projects. And it exposes the anti-democratic origins of the New World Order. If it really matters to think and act politically for a just, democratic society, then "JFK" makes that point.

Robert Spiegelman has researched and written about the Kennedy assassination and was a technical adviser on "JFK." □