

CHRISTOPHER MATTHEWS

Stone's 'JFK' is no John F. Kennedy

A *Washington* EARLY SCENE in Oliver Stone's "JFK" offers a telling preview of what's to come. We meet a cartoonish right-winger played by Ed Asner drunkenly enjoying the news of John F. Kennedy's assassination. In a torrent of abuse, the lout makes some nastily vindictive comment about "Camelot."

It could never have happened, and here's why. The whole notion of making Jack Kennedy out to be some romanticized, 20th century King Arthur simply did not exist in November 1963. All the gauze-covered hagiography of the New Frontier came later, based upon something his widow, Jacqueline, said to author Theodore H. White.

Getting that small point wrong is typical of "JFK." The whole movie is an anachronism. Stone goes to great lengths to re-create the look of the early 1960s. He goes to equal lengths to impose his own 1990s world view on the man he claims as his film's victim. Sit through three hours plus of "JFK" and you get a post-Vietnam portrait of a decidedly pre-Vietnam president.

Stone's "JFK" is a figure opposed to stopping Communist aggression around the world, opposed to the Cold War, opposed to the invasion of Cuba, opposed to the war in Vietnam, opposed to big military budgets.

It's understandable that Stone would concoct such a character. He makes the perfect counterpoint to his motley band of conspirators — New Orleans gays, the CIA, Army intelligence, Lyndon Johnson, Time magazine, Cuban nationalists — who held some big secret



EXAMINER/FILE

meeting somewhere in 1963 to plot the assassination of a president and its cover-up. Such a cartoonish conspiracy of the right requires an equally cartoonish victim of the left.

The premise has one big problem. If the assassins were looking to kill an enemy of the Cold War and strong U.S. defense, they got the wrong man. The title character in "JFK" could not have gotten a job in Jack Kennedy's New Frontier, much less been confused with the top man.

Let's start and end with this: John F. Kennedy was a liberal,

Christopher Matthews is chief of The Examiner's Washington bureau.

increasingly so toward the end; he was also an anti-communist. He believed then, despite what Oliver Stone may believe now, that the struggle to contain Soviet imperialism was a good fight. He said that the United States and the Soviets were engaged in a long "twilight struggle" that had to be waged politically, economically and, where both necessary and feasible, militarily.

The Kennedy record is clear on this, starting with his earliest speeches as a member of the House. When China fell to the

It's a post-Viet portrait of a decidedly pre-Viet president

Communists, Kennedy blasted the Truman administration.

"So concerned were our diplomats with the imperfections of the democratic system in China and tales of corruption in high places," he said in a 1949 speech on the House floor, "that they lost sight of our tremendous stake in a non-Communist China."

Kennedy took an equally hard line in the '60 race for the presidency. It was he, not rival Richard

what Kennedy said next in the same Sept. 2, 1963, interview with CBS's Walter Cronkite:

"I don't agree with those who say we should withdraw. That would be a great mistake. I know people don't like Americans to be engaged in this kind of an effort. Forty-seven Americans have been killed in combat with the enemy, but this is a very important struggle even though it is far away. We made this effort to defend Europe. Now Europe is secure. We also have to participate — we may not like it — in the defense of Asia."

Yes, Kennedy had doubts about Vietnam. He knew the danger of being caught on the wrong side of a nationalistic struggle and warned the French of the peril.

He also knew that the South Vietnamese needed to carry the bulk of the fight against the north. This explains why weeks before Kennedy died he allowed the assassination of President Ngo Dinh Diem, a man he did not believe could win the war.

Nixon, who called in their TV debate for an overthrow of Fidel Castro; who championed the idea of a U.S.-Soviet "missile gap" that needed to be plugged with a bigger Pentagon budget.

Unlike Stone's "JFK," Kennedy was also worried about a defeat in South Vietnam, afraid like most Americans of another Communist victory. In the film, we hear Kennedy saying that "in the final analysis, it is their war. They are the ones who have to win it or lose it."

What Stone neatly deletes is

NO, I DON'T believe Kennedy would have allowed the Vietnam War to become an American war. He learned that lesson from the French. But the real tragedy of Vietnam remains that it was undertaken and fought by people, starting with Kennedy, who believed it part of a necessary and noble mission, the global containment of communism.

To foist blame for Vietnam and the Cold War on a "military-industrial complex" substitutes a childish fairy tale for a poignant, difficult, horrible part of our history.