

Abroad at Home

ANTHONY LEWIS

'J.F.K.'

Oliver Stone's "J.F.K." may well move a generation to believe that a conspiracy lay behind the assassination of President Kennedy. That is its message, and a film that hits the emotions as skillfully as this one does can have a profound impact.

It is right, therefore, to take the movie seriously. Its charges could hardly be more serious. It suggests that Earl Warren, the revered Chief Justice, was party to covering up a murderous conspiracy. It tells us that our Government cannot be trusted even to give an honest account of a President's assassination.

The question is whether the film produces meaningful new evidence that should cause us to question the finding of the Warren commission that Lee Harvey Oswald alone killed John Kennedy. To those unfamiliar with the Warren report and its 26 volumes of evidence, much in the movie will appear new. But is it?

1. The audience was most moved, when I saw "J.F.K.," by Abraham Zapruder's film of the President's car moving in Dallas as he was killed. Kennedy's head snapped back. Surely, then, he must have been hit by a bullet fired from the front, not from the rear where Oswald was.

In fact, not just the President's head but his body moved backward. Medical experts told the commission that what happened was "a violent straightening and stiffening of the entire body," as one put it, "as a result of a seizure-like neuromuscular reaction to major damage inflicted to nerve centers in the brain."

Experiments with animals shot from the rear produced just such a reaction. The physical impact of a shot from the front would not move the body back.

The bullet that hit the President in the head broke apart. Two fragments were ballistically identifiable. Tests showed that they came from Oswald's rifle and could have come from no other.

Twenty medical experts examined the autopsy photographs and X-rays. Nineteen concluded that the shots that hit the President came from behind him.

2. The Zapruder film shows that

Does the film offer new evidence?

about 5.5 seconds elapsed between a shot that wounded Kennedy and the one that killed him. Oswald fired three shots, one of which missed entirely. "J.F.K." argues that Oswald could not have fired three shots from an old-style rifle in 5.5 seconds.

But Oswald could have fired the shot that missed before the two that hit, or after them, rather than between the two as the movie assumes. Then he would have had 5.5 seconds for two shots: time enough. The Warren commission so found.

3. The movie makes much of alleged links between Oswald and Jack Ruby, who killed Oswald in the Dallas police station as he was being transferred to the county jail on Sunday, Nov. 24, 1963. It suggests that this killing was part of the cover-up.

The charge ignores unchallenged evidence. A postal inspector named Harry Holmes, a friend of the police captain in charge, was on his way to church that morning when he changed his mind and went down to the police station. He was taken in to Oswald's interrogation. When the police finished, they let Mr. Holmes ask questions — and he did, for 30 minutes. Without the accident of his presence, Oswald would have left the building long before Ruby arrived.

Every specific charge made in the movie similarly ignores extensive, for me dispositive, evidence. It gives weight to witnesses long since discredited. It does not mention the scientific findings that Oswald's gun fired the bullets that hit President Kennedy and Gov. John Connally.

Oliver Stone uses as his mouthpiece Jim Garrison, the former New Orleans District Attorney, who in real life bribed witnesses to prosecute an innocent man — and was laughed out of court. He alleges a conspiracy among the Army, the C.I.A., Lyndon Johnson and endless others: without a shred of evidence.

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Wrong

The best insight into Oliver Stone's character, for me, was his treatment of Chief Justice Warren. Earl Warren no doubt had his faults. But he loved this country with all his heart, and the assassination tore him apart. The notion that he would cover up that assassination is contemptible: a contempt well expressed by Stone's choice of the real Jim Garrison to play Earl Warren in the film.

I have no illusion that facts will dispel Oliver Stone's fantasy. Even to question the existence of a conspiracy is to risk being called a conspirator. Television is fascinated with the Stone phenomenon. It has no time for the man who knows more of the actual facts of the assassination than anyone else: David W. Belin, who was counsel to the Warren commission and has seen every document, every C.I.A. file.

No, the thirst for some deeper, darker truth is unquenchable in America. We want the answer. We want to open some file and find the conspiracy. But we never shall. □