

Mon. 12/30/91
 COLUMN LEFT
 TOM HAYDEN

Shadows on the American Storybook

■ The Establishment fears Oliver Stone because he could infect the young with the radical virus.

Why is there such an unparalleled media attack on Oliver Stone? His "JFK" is hardly the first controversial film of our time. The "Godfather" films alleged that the Mafia and the Vatican conspired in laundering drug money and killing a Pope, yet were reviewed calmly.

The media furor is about more than whether Stone takes license with certain facts, which he does, or whether he conclusively proves his conspiracy thesis, which he doesn't. The argument is really over the meaning of the 1960s.

The radicalism of that decade has been mostly dismissed in recent years as a cause that deservedly failed. There are no visionary heroes now, no civil-rights marches. Politics has become a cynical marketing game, funded by special interests. Media talk-show commentators are the official spokesmen for all opinion that they considered legitimate. Critics of our most recent war were mostly deleted from media coverage, which turned instead to commentary from retired military men.

Now comes Oliver Stone as an incarnation of the 1960s who cannot be dismissed. Like an Id from our past, he terrorizes the official subconscious with the fear that a new generation will be infected with a radical virus that was supposed to have been eradicated.

But the sensibility of Americans like Oliver Stone—and there are many of us—is rooted in experience. We came of age in a time of great idealism that was shattered by the killing of a President, which led to a very bad decade indeed. We became not has-beens but might-have-beens, doomed not to know what our lives would have been like if J.F.K. had not been murdered.

Our experience led us to believe that

American democracy was not what it claimed to be, a process of peaceful interest groups competing for a voter majority within a framework of law. Instead, it was a system threatened by invisible elites, illegal conspiracies and faceless killers, some of them officially connected. Not monolithic conspiracies by any means, or even competent ones, but shadowy and pervasive nonetheless.

Our alienation deepened with Kennedy's murder, with the Warren Commission's unbelievable public-relations effort, with the subsequent escalation in Vietnam—and, above all, with the fact that the institution we trusted for the truth, the

'We became not has-beens but might-have-beens, doomed not to know what our lives would have been like if J.F.K. had not been murdered.'

media, offered too little criticism too late.

Stone could have died fighting in Vietnam for a government that, by lying, broke his American heart. Thousands did die, along with millions of Indochinese, and countless others had their life hopes permanently changed for the worse.

Stone brilliantly expresses the unanswered cry of the 1960s. We do live in a culture that produces David Ferries, Howard Hunts, J. Edgar Hoovers, Oliver Norths, Watergate break-ins, Iran-Contra cover-ups and unsolved murders of our leaders.

The current attacks on Stone recall the CIA memo in the late 1960s that suggested orchestrating an effort to defend the Warren Commission through existing "propaganda assets," that is, friendly journalists, "to answer and refute the attacks of critics."

The media has, in its current frenzy, indeed been acting as a "propaganda asset." But for whom? Not the CIA—the media has criticized the agency often enough. Rather, the media is a "propaganda asset" for a storybook concept of democracy.

I would suggest that, unlike Stone, most successful journalists, cannot bring themselves to believe that they live in a country where leaders could be murdered by interest groups. Instead, they cling to a fairy tale notion of democracy that lets them sleep at night.

But can they seriously claim that democracy is working as planned? It is easier to attack the in-your-face paranoia of Oliver Stone than to question the system that made him so. We need more haunted souls than comfortable sleepers in this country. We cannot repress and deny the past forever. Thank God Stone tries to wake us up.

Assemblyman Tom Hayden (D-Santa Monica) was a founder of the Indochina Peace Campaign and a defendant in the Chicago Seven trial that grew out of the 1968 Democratic Convention.