

Movie madness?

Oliver Stone's assassination theory

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JFK
Camden Parkway and other cinemas

At a high point in the trial of wealthy businessman Clay Shaw for participation in a conspiracy to assassinate John F. Kennedy, Charles Spiesel, an accountant from New York, gave crucial evidence. He recalled in great detail a conversation with Clay Shaw in which the businessman explained both why Kennedy should be assassinated and how it should be done.

On cross examination, Spiesel admitted he had often been hypnotized, even by people he didn't know, who try to "catch your eye", then "plant certain thoughts in your mind and give you the illusion they're true". New York City police, for example, had hypnotized him. When Spiesel's daughter left New York for Louisiana State University, he said, he regularly fingerprinted her, then every semester carefully fingerprinted her again when she came back home. Why would he do this? Why, to make sure he was getting back the same girl. The case against Shaw collapsed.

Interestingly, the hypnotism-fingerprinting testimony does not appear in Oliver Stone's new film, *JFK*, although it figures prominently in *On the Trail of the Assassins* by one-time New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, America's leading "conspiracy buff", who brought the case against Clay Shaw and on whose book the film is ostensibly based.

The film version is so tendentious and so frenzied that one wonders if Oliver Stone himself is often hypnotized by people who catch his eye, and if he fingerprinted Kevin Costner every morning on the set to make sure it was the same Kevin Costner he'd said goodbye to the night before. Indeed, since Costner made a large campaign contribution to US Senator Phil Gramm from Texas, a major conservative Republican on the national scene, appearing on platforms with Gramm at political rallies, the daily fingerprinting of the actor to make sure occult forces had not substituted another Kevin Costner might have seemed only prudent.

A fascinating scene that does appear in the movie, however, shows us a homosexual prostitute, Willie O'Keefe (brilliantly played by Kevin Bacon), in prison, who says he was present at homosexual frolics with Clay Shaw, and at



J. F. Kennedy with baby Caroline in Hyannis Port in 1958

another meeting with Shaw and other such persons during which they talk about assassinating Kennedy by "triangulation", with three teams of sharpshooters. Testimonial evidence like this might not stand up in court because of the dubious moral quality of the witness, Stone indicates, but the ordinary person would find it perfectly plausible. As a character in the film says, "Doesn't a prostitute have eyes?"

Prostitutes, of course, do have eyes. But not this prostitute. Because there is no Willie O'Keefe. He is pure fiction.

And so Oliver Stone romps through the assassination of John Kennedy, inventing evidence that supports his thesis, suppressing all evidence that conflicts with it, directing his film in a pummeling style, a left to the jaw, a right to the solar plexus, flashing forward, flashing backward, crosscutting relentlessly, shooting "in tight" (in close), blurring, obfuscating, bludgeoning the viewer until Stone wins, he hopes, by a TKO.

What is Stone's thesis? That Jack Kennedy was assassinated because, a man of peace, realizing the disaster for which his country was headed in Vietnam, he'd decided to pull out, to withdraw American forces completely. If Kennedy was planning such a withdrawal, it was a secret locked

within the deepest recesses of his heart, because there is no evidence of it whatsoever.

Well after the assassination, Kennedy's brother Bobby, campaigning for the US Senate seat in New York, favoured cancelling "educational deferments" of military service for university students so that the US could press on more wholeheartedly with the war. And both Kennedy's Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, and Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, have stated that for years after the assassination, serving under President Lyndon Johnson, they were still convinced that America would prevail in Vietnam.

The "Vietnam withdrawal" theory, advanced by Garrison in his book in a stop-gap way, in two lines, with no footnotes, no hint as to how he learned of such a withdrawal plan on Kennedy's part, assumes in Oliver Stone's hands the proportions of full-blown delirium. For Stone, it is ludicrous to believe that the assassination could be the work of a lone gunman, of a small assassination team, or even of a rogue-elephant disaffected group.

In Stone's movie, in reaction to Kennedy's plan to withdraw from Vietnam, we have a vast assassination conspiracy put together "at the highest levels" of the US government, a conspiracy which would have to have included thousands of people. The CIA was in on it, of course, as well as the FBI, military, military intelligence, the joint chiefs — and the White House. Lyndon Johnson, who succeeded Kennedy, was most definitely in on it, although technically only an "accomplice after the fact".

District Attorney Jim Garrison (Kevin Costner), in his climactic summation before the jury in the Clay Shaw trial in New Orleans, pulls out all the stops. (In fact, Garrison did not deliver

the summation.) The United States is on the brink of "fascism". Who could believe that the assassination was carried out by a "lone gunman"? Moreover, who could believe lone gunmen killed other such men of peace as Martin Luther King, Jr and Bobby Kennedy? All these killers were in the employ of America's "military industrial complex".

This would apparently include Sirhan Sirhan, the Jerusalem-born Jordanian who confessed to shooting Bobby Kennedy in Los Angeles in 1968 (he said specifically) because of Kennedy's anti-Arab favouritism towards Israel. But who could believe an Arab would commit an act of violence to a friend of Israel? Worthy of belief, on the other hand, is the film's "Deep Throat", a nameless retired US Army colonel whom Garrison, in the film, flies up to meet in Washington, DC, and who corroborates his worst fears. The real Garrison, in fact, never met such a person.

But director Oliver Stone met such a person. A retired colonel named L. Fletcher Prouty, hearing a movie was in the making, sought out Stone and became his closest adviser. Prouty retained this position until he was revealed as a member of the board of directors of America's Liberty Lobby, a right-wing extremist group, various associates of which support the Ku Klux Klan, believe Auschwitz to have been a "Jew-sponsored hoax", and think one of the plotters behind the Kennedy assassination was McGeorge Bundy, former head of the Ford Foundation and Dean of Harvard College. A character based on Prouty appears in the film, but Stone seems to have thought it advisable to make him nameless, a mysterious "Colonel X" (Donald Sutherland). Colonel X tells the movie-Garrison that the assassination was a "military style ambush from start to finish,

a *coup d'état* with Lyndon Johnson waiting in the wings". He encounters no scepticism.

JFK seems to have found broad support among the stars of Hollywood, if we can judge by the string of famous and talented actors whose dedication to the project is shown by their willingness to play even the film's very minor roles. In addition to Kevin Bacon and Donald Sutherland we have – in a particularly striking performance as a murderous conspirator – Joe Pesci (Academy Award for *Goodfellas*), Ed Asner, Walter Matthau, Jack Lemmon. Academy Award winner Sissy Spacek plays Garrison's wife. Tommy Lee Jones plays Clay Shaw. Britain's Gary Oldman plays Lee Harvey Oswald. Sally Kirkland, who fought to bring an end to the Vietnam War by acting nude on Broadway, gets thrown out of a car in *JFK* and in the hospital cries, "They're going to kill the president!" Dark forces presumably don't like this, because Miss Kirkland (clothed, the Vietnam War being over) gets thrown out of a car again.

JFK begins with a barrage of newsreel and television clips evoking the history of the period: Dwight Eisenhower, Nikita Khrushchev, Fidel Castro, the photogenic Kennedy clan in Hyannisport, early war scenes from Vietnam. We find Jim Garrison in his office in New Orleans learning of Kennedy's assassination, which of course took place in Dallas. But Lee Harvey Oswald, Garrison learns, was handing out flyers for the "Fair Play for Cuba" organization there in New Orleans. He investigates. He investigates some more. His wife complains that he isn't paying enough attention to his family. She complains about this twice, three times. But Garrison is a driven man.

And the whole story begins to unravel. Or perhaps to ravel. We meet these homosexuals, fanatic anti-Communists, Kennedy-haters all. On the face of it, anti-Communists being Kennedy-haters is in itself odd, because what with old Joe Kennedy a fervent supporter of Franco, Bobby Kennedy working for Senator Joe McCarthy, and Jack Kennedy himself attacking both Eisenhower and Richard Nixon in the 1960 presidential campaign as responding feebly to the menace of international Communism, the Kennedys were a notorious Red-baiting family. An alleged Soviet lead in missiles (the "missile gap") and the supposed Eisenhower abandonment of Chiang Kai-Shek to ruthless Red China (the coastal islands of Quemoy and Matsu were under attack) became favourite Kennedy issues in the 1960 campaign.

But the film surges onwards to its blazing finish with Garrison delivering his summation in court: how many shots, how many shooters, from where, the "grassy knoll", unnamed conspirators protecting the retreat of the assassins, unnamed admirals and generals halting the Kennedy autopsy, Lyndon Johnson, *coup d'état*, "fascism", the classified files. The film is solemnly dedicated to the young and to future generations, who are encouraged to keep digging.

Never in the history of Hollywood has a motion picture been slammed so vehemently by America's political class. Politicians and political writers of every political hue have condemned *JFK* as irresponsible and even crazed: hard left, soft left,

right, centre. On the whole, film critics, who identify with the country's "artistic" class, have rather liked the movie, which sets them conspicuously apart from other American commentators, columnists, and journalists, who, with truly extraordinary unanimity, have been absolutely appalled by the film. Perhaps one should not buy a used car from a film critic.

In defence of the acting profession, I should point out that Australia's Mel Gibson (American born), who was offered the role of Garrison before Kevin Costner, emphatically turned it down after a dinner meeting with director Stone that has

been described as "strained". Stone, a trifle defensive now if not exactly shaken, has started comparing himself with Shakespeare (the historical liberties in *Henry V*), Orson Welles (*Citizen Kane*), and Akira Kurosawa (*Rashomon*). When Stone added hypothetical scenes to *JFK*, he now says, he was "exploring all possible scenarios of who killed Kennedy", showing that an event, as in *Rashomon*, can be seen from more than one point of view. But among *JFK*'s many fictions and imaginative constructs not the faintest glimmer of a point of view other than Stone's is ever allowed to appear. And Oliver Stone knows that in a

famous Walter Cronkite CBS television interview with Jack Kennedy shortly before his assassination, of which Stone shows us a fragment, Kennedy says of Vietnam in so many words:

I don't agree with those who say we should withdraw. That would be a great mistake. . . .

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.

These lines, which knock the basic assumption of *JFK* into a cocked hat, are, of course, sup-

pressed by Mr Stone. Kevin Costner, who has bravely stood behind the wildly unhistorical account of white-Indian relations in his *Dances With Wolves*, has taken his distance from *JFK*, saying that "you could discredit and dismantle everything in *JFK*", and that the movie has only an "emotional truth", whatever that is. His friends have suddenly started reporting that Costner is not "particularly interested" in politics or history.

There has been a ripple of speculation in Washington as to how *JFK* would have been received by America's left-liberal commentators

if the film, or Garrison, had managed to implicate as an accomplice in the Kennedy assassination not Lyndon Johnson – a liberal Democrat in domestic affairs and author of many social welfare programmes alive today – but Richard Nixon. It would have been a “stretch”, as they say in Hollywood, but well worth it, I should think. When all is said and done, a man needs allies. If Oliver Stone doesn't know this, it would seem that the director, who has lectured us so sternly about the evils of war (*Platoon*), high finance (*Wall Street*) and imperialism (*Salvador*), doesn't know so much about the ways of the world after all.