

History

Taking a Darker View

The conspiracy theories reflected in JFK may not be persuasive, but they churn up a murky underside of America

Three weeks after its release, Oliver Stone's film JFK continues to stir passions and debate, and to prompt calls for the release of secret government files on the Kennedy assassination. Last week the controversy drew a response from President Bush, who said while traveling in Australia that although he had not seen the movie, he had no reason to doubt the Warren Commission's finding that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in shooting Kennedy. While no new evidence has emerged, the film has focused attention on the band of mostly self-appointed experts who zealously pursue theories of a wider plot. This subculture is explored here by Ron Rosenbaum, a contributing editor of Vanity Fair and the author of *Travels with Doctor Death*, who has written extensively on conspiracy theories.

By RON ROSENBAUM

Some years ago, during a telephone interview, I finally succeeded in badgering Jim Garrison into naming the Name. For years Garrison had been telling people he had the whole case cold: he knew who gave the orders, who fired the shots and from where. Still, though he had talked a lot about the Big Guys behind the plot—intelligence agencies, the military-industrial complex and the like—he had never publicly named the name of the man he believed fired the fatal head shot from the grassy knoll.

I won't tell you that name, because Garrison didn't give me any evidence for singling out this person for historic infamy. On another day, I felt, he might have picked another name out of the hat.

Still, for one guilty moment I had the kind of thrill that assassination buffs live for: I had the Name everyone else was looking for and no one else had. Of

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Analysis

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SUNDAY, DECEMBER 20, 1991

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By Michael L...

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History to interpret in new film

By Jefferson Graham

Stone's movie re-creation of the assassination: a legacy of three decades of revisionism

course, it wasn't an entirely unknown name. Garrison told me the person had been questioned extensively by Warren Commission investigators, and when I looked him up in the Warren Commission testimony, I found he plays a kind of Rosencrantz-and-Guildenstern-level role in the Warren Report, that of a peripheral figure in a key place: he was a live-in manager and janitor at Jack Ruby's sleazy strip joint, the Carousel Club. There's no doubt that the commission investigators were interested in his story—the transcript of his testimony runs more than 200 pages—but mostly because he was a source who might shed some light on the peculiarities of Jack Ruby's character (investigators repeatedly pressed the Name on whether Ruby had any sexual interest in his beloved dog Sheba).

Though reading the testimony didn't give me much intimation of an assassination revelation, it was a revelation of another kind. In telling his life story, of how he wound up in the Carousel Club in 1963, the Name was telling a story of an American life—of an America—far different from the one I'd known in my suburban hometown.

It was a story of a guy who made his living in the carnival world; he worked as a barker with small-time freak-show acts like "the two-headed baby" and "the snake girl," he told the Warren Commission. He bummed around looking for roustabout jobs, met his first wife at a Salvation Army mission. When she left him in the summer of 1963, he hitchhiked all the way from the West Coast to Dallas looking for her. Picked up some work at the Texas state fair in a carney sideshow called "How Hollywood Makes Movies," which featured some of Jack Ruby's strippers. Made some connections and soon found himself living in the back room of the Carousel Club in the midst of Ruby's strange ménage, which included strippers, burlesque comics, stage hypnotists and, of course, the dog Sheba.

I remember reading this testimony, mesmerized by my sudden immersion in a carnival-sideshow underbelly of American life. (The 26 volumes of Warren Commission testimony are like a vast, inchoate Great American Novel in that respect.) I didn't feel I was any closer to solving the Kennedy assassination, but I did feel I had learned more about the America that pro-



Editorial Noteb

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Hollywood: History by Default

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pens to be the truth—is almost never shown to the public. Certainly, it is not shown in the Oliver Stone-Kevin Costner film, reputedly produced at a cost approaching \$40 million.

Like the A&E series, "JFK," alleges a conspiracy supposedly including elements of the ultimate proof of the conspiracy—the killing of Oswald by Jack Stone's fantasy

Ruby shooting Oswald in 1963: a sleazy, carnival-sideshow vision of the nation's leaders

duced both Kennedy and his assassin than was conveyed by the bland, complacent sitcom image of the nation and its institutions that prevailed in November 1963.

And that, I believe, is the real legacy of nearly three decades of revisionist Kennedy-assassination investigation. We may not ever know with certainty the Name or the Names. But we do have a much darker, more complex, less innocent vision of America, produced by the murk that has been churned up by the dissidents.

Consider the FBI. In 1963 few dissented from the view that its director, J. Edgar Hoover, was a peerless, incorruptible leader, a gangbuster nonpareil. He said so himself. Now, we may not want to agree with the conclusion of the latest FBI-centered conspiracy-theory book *Act of Treason: The Role of J. Edgar Hoover in the Assassination of President Kennedy*. The author, Texas attorney Mark North, accuses Hoover of deliberately withholding knowledge of a Mafia assassination plot against J.F.K. because he hated the Kennedy brothers and had enough dirt on L.B.J. to control him. But North's accumulation of documentary evidence of the ugly blackmail intrigues Hoover was weaving in the cellars

of Camelot is perhaps even more damning than the allegations of treason.

Much of this has been reported earlier: the way Hoover pressured the Kennedys into letting him bug the bedrooms of Martin Luther King Jr.; how he subtly blackmailed the Camelot kids over their bedroom sports, including J.F.K.'s romps with the girlfriend of godfather Sam Giancana and (probably) with Marilyn Monroe. We know that while Hoover was passing around tapes of creaking bedsprings, he was letting the Mob grow unchecked and was going easy on deep sewers of Washington corruption like the Bobby Baker case to protect patrons like L.B.J.

Or consider the CIA. To those who knew of it at all in 1963, it was still living off the glamour of its wartime OSS (Office of Strategic Services) legend—the dashing blue-blooded oh-so-social spies, American James Bonds. Even the black eye of the Bay of Pigs fiasco could be attributed to Kennedy's failure of nerve rather than to the Harvard and Yale ole boys who drew up the plans. From almost the very beginning, the CIA has been a focus of Kennedy-assassination conspiracy theories (bitterness by some agents over



truth?

cases were found, which ballistically were shown to have come from Oswald's rifle. It was Brennan who notified the police of the source of the shots and who described the assassin as slender, about 5 feet, 11 inches, 150 to 160 pounds, white—a description remarkably close to Oswald.

Nowhere do the viewers learn that the probable time span of Oswald's three shots is around 10 seconds, in light of the fact that on Oswald's shots missed—most likely the first—the last. Instead, Garrison speaks only of 1 shot being fired within 5.6 seconds, when shots being fired within 4-second time span was between the president.

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Kennedy's Bay of Pigs "betrayal" was an obvious motive). This year the first and most relentless conspiracy theorist of them all, Mark Lane, has come out with a book, *Plausible Denial*, which targets high-level CIA figures as the plotters behind the assassination. Lane presents what he calls new and conclusive evidence that the CIA was setting up Oswald in the months before the assassination by having an Oswald impersonator meet with Soviet and Cuban agents in Mexico City, the better to frame him as a Commie assassin.

Again, even if we don't buy Lane's conclusion about CIA complicity in the Kennedy assassination, 20 years of investigations have shown that the CIA was no stranger to complicity in assassinations. We know how the best and brightest blue bloods bonded with the bloodiest and dirtiest Mafia hit men in plots to kill Castro. We know the freak-show side of the agency that used damaging mind-control drugs on unsuspecting citizens; we know that the agency's own top counterspy, James Angleton, paralyzed the place with his paranoid suspicions that KGB moles and false defectors had penetrated the CIA in order to, among other things, conceal the Soviets' true role in the J.F.K. assassination. Even David Belin, the former Warren Commission staff member who is fighting what he calls a "David and Goliath battle" to defend the Warren Commission's lone-gunman conclusion, declares in his book *Final Disclosure* that the CIA blatantly deceived his beloved Warren Commission—specifically that it "deliberately withheld evidence" of the CIA-Mafia plots against Castro.

Now consider the Kennedys themselves. Inevitably the darker, carnival-esque vision of America that has emerged in the wake of post-assassination investigations has not exempted them. Curiously, otherwise skeptical assassination buffs are among the last misty-eyed believers in Camelot. They still hold to the primal scenario sketched in Oliver Stone's *JFK*: a Galahad-like John Kennedy gallantly battling the sinister right-wing military-industrial complex to bring the troops home, ban the Bomb and ensure racial equality on the home front—a Kennedy killed because he was just too good to live.

You can hear other echoes of this naive vision in such conspiracy-theory compendiums as Jim Marrs' *Crossfire: The Plot That Killed Kennedy*, which was a key source for Stone. Marrs sums up his account of the Bad Guys in the plot, laboring to leave no one out: "Who done it? . . . Powerful men in the leadership of the U.S. military, banking, government, intelligence and organized-crime circles ordered their faithful agents to manipulate Mafia-Cuban-agency pawns to kill the chief."

But what's more interesting is Marrs' arcadian vision of what America might be

