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The kooks have it

Conspiracists boom as the president fades, reports Alexander Cockburn

The past couple of weeks have been among the worst endured by George Bush since he became president. Gibes and ridicule attain critical mass at a certain point and the president is getting dangerously close. Towards the end of his term, Jimmy Carter could not put a foot right, and, in his despair, committed follies such as saying his canoe had been attacked by a rabbit.

Bush looked awful even before he flew all the way to Tokyo to throw up on Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa's shoes. David Frost recently emerged from a White House interview to tell friends the president seemed in ghastly shape. On his usual regimen of Halcion (a jet-lag drug that causes memory loss and delusions), Bush flew from Washington to Texas where he shot quail, jogged; flew to Hawaii, jogged; flew to Sydney, jogged; flew to Singapore (very humid), held a conference in blazing sun; flew to Seoul (very cold), played tennis with President Ro Tae Woo (on an indoor court at 34°F); flew to Osaka, played *hemari* (in which a flaccid deerskin is kicked about by elderly aristocrats); then back to Tokyo where the 67-year-old hyperactivist played tennis doubles with the Emperor Akihito and his son (lost 6-3, 6-3). Then, suffering a tummy upset and taking Tigan, on to the fateful rendezvous with Saumon Frais Mariné à L'Aneth au Caviar (pickled raw fish).

It reminds me of the schoolboy translation of Cicero's line when he describes the effect of his indictment of Catiline: *Abiit, excessit, evasit, erupit* ("he got up to go, he rushed out, he escaped, he burst from the building"). The schoolboy had it as *abiit*, he went out to dinner; *excessit*, he had too much to drink; *erupit*, he was violently sick; *evasit*, he said it was the salmon. If the fish had been fugu, Bush could have been dead before he hit the ground. Good morning, President Quayle. Pat Buchanan, Bush's far-right Republican challenger, is watching the situation closely.

Meanwhile the opinion-mongers have all decided that the Democratic candidate will be governor Bill Clinton of Arkansas. A lemming-like rush is on to clamber aboard the Clinton bandwagon. New York politicians such as the indubitably liberal borough president of Manhattan, Ruth Messinger, have dumped the erstwhile liberal hero, Tom Harkin, and rushed to Clinton's camp. Rich donors, scrutinising Clinton's and Harkin's

respective platforms realised that, whereas Harkin talks about labour and taxing the rich, Clinton is, maturely, for business as usual. He is warmly nebulous on anything demanding moral fibre. His economic programme is hot air, although the press has been extraordinarily lenient.

Can Clinton be stopped? Voters could take a passionate dislike to him. He could also be damaged, as Gary Hart was, by allegations that have been made of philandering. The press is being nice about this, but the Republicans will be less forgiving.

But while the press has been acclimatising itself to Clinton as nominee and maybe president, a great many ordinary folk have been tasting politics in the form of Oliver Stone's *JFK*. Not a few radical friends of mine regard the film as politically significant.

"Pull on the October Surprise [the operation that produced the release of American hostages in Iran the day Reagan was inaugurated] thread, and the last 10 years of US history unravel; pull on the JFK thread, and the last 30 years of US history unravel," wrote one. He seemed to be suggesting that somehow the "October surprise" and JFK's assassination are the key to understanding what has happened in America since 1963.

I have heard plenty of people on the left advance this, arguing that only with the unveiling of these mysteries can come explication of our fraught history and renewed political growth.

Maybe it's a sign of the political despondency of our times, but this standpoint is becoming more and more common. Politics are seen as enigma, or as conspiracy, in which decent institutions were corrupted or betrayed by a "secret team", variously identified as

rogue CIA officers (the Christie Institute's view), the military industrial complex, particularly LBJ and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, conspiring to kill JFK (Stone's view), the Trilateral, Bilderberg, the Council on Foreign Relations (left and right conspiracy kooks), the Federal Reserve, the Warburgs, Rothschilds, Jews *passim* (the far right).

The core notion here is that something good (the presidency, JFK's secret agenda for peace, the aims of the Founding Fathers) has been betrayed. This is a liberal analysis, and *JFK* teeters between fascism and liberalism. On the one hand, Stone has Jim Garrison (the film's district-attorney hero) speak about the slain "father-leader", whose children we are, and whose revenge must be consummated before America can be truly free. This is a fascist historical aesthetic. On the other hand, Stone constantly promotes the idea that Kennedy was a "good" president, who wanted to pull troops out of Vietnam, negotiate with Castro, make the lion lie next to the lamb, and so on, but was betrayed by LBJ, the generals and big business.

But the premise (pull the thread and history unravels) and Stone's thesis are nonsense. We *know* what has happened during

the past generation; it has been unravelling in plain view. Oh, we've learned some of the state's secrets (for example the Kennedy administration's efforts to assassinate Fidel Castro), but this was detail. But radical historians, journalists and economists, had already outlined the picture. It's an open secret, a story of dominant institutions and classes, the search for markets, protection of wealth and exploitation of resources.

There is no golden key (ie, the truth about the Kennedy assassination; "proof" that George Bush travelled to Paris for secret talks with Iranians on 20 October 1980) that will suddenly render this overall system transparent. There is a certain mystical tradition on the left, going back through Dr Mesmer to alchemy, but it has never done us much good, and in its latterday form it is a hindrance to clear thought.

Stone's *JFK* seems to me to embody everything that the left ought to be cautious about. His history is bogus and his aesthetics questionable. Actually Stone tries to have it both ways. He maintains that *JFK* is all true, until someone insists forcefully that it isn't. Then he tacks the other way and says he is trying to construct an alternative "myth". Every artist deals in myth, but anyone arguing for Stone's dealings with history ought to be aware of the morally tricky terrain. *JFK* has scenes, made to simulate authentic news film, in which LBJ and the Joint Chiefs of Staff collude in planning the murder of JFK. I suppose this is part of the construction of an alternative myth. Stone may indeed feel

such collusion was "morally" or even substantively true, though no such news film exists. But suppose another film-maker, eager to construct a myth, put out a film on the murder of Robert Kennedy in which there was footage of Yasser Arafat and other PLO leaders ordering the assassin, Sirhan, to his task? I don't

imagine many on the left would take an admiring attitude.

And remember, the myth Stone constructs is of a good president, brought down by evil forces. One of the last speeches JFK ever gave was when he stated that Cuba had been taken over by a band of criminals, who should be evicted. These words had been inserted by his friend Desmond Fitzgerald, head of the CIA's special operations unit against Castro. They were a signal demanded by Cubela, a Cuban double-agent whom the CIA thought was ready to kill Castro. Cubela had requested that these words be spoken by JFK to show that he, Cubela, was not dealing with a rogue CIA unit. Then another CIA officer under Fitzgerald's command proceeded to Paris and, around 12.30pm on 22 November 1963, handed Cubela a poison pen with which Castro could be killed. The CIA officer returned to his office to find JFK had been assassinated.

All this unravelled long ago, and is part of the true history of what JFK was

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