

# 'JFK': Is it search for deeper truths or artistic license?

## CHUCK STONE

Film proves great theater, but mostly far-out history



**PHILADELPHIA**  
The moment is burned into the soul of our memories. But more than a quarter of a century after a bullet shattered America's Camelot and shredded our innocence, we cannot agree on who assassinated John F. Kennedy and why.

The Oliver Stone film "JFK" tries to fill a gaping chasm with a mind-gripping pastiche of fact and fancy, cooked in the pot of history and stirred with the devil's spoon.

The film's co-writer, co-producer and director, Oliver Stone, challenges the labyrinthine conclusions of the Warren Commission, then concocts an outlandishly incredible theory that links the Pentagon, the CIA, the Secret Service, the FBI, right-wing Cubans and a cabal of gays in a conspiracy to assassinate a soft-on-global-communism president.

Stone's "JFK" then contends that a secondary conspiracy between the Warren Commission and the media protected the primary conspirators. Obviously, this is titillating mischief. But theater is not obligated to guarantee fidelity to history.

Factual flaws in "JFK" are probably no more excessive than those reported by Thucydides in his "Peloponnesian War" or the dramatic license Shakespeare took in his interpretations of the tribulations of Julius Caesar, the two King Richards and the three King Henrys.

The difference with the Kennedy assassination is the sense of historical immediacy. Those of us old enough to remember were there. Maybe that's why several media commentators and former members of the Warren Commission feel betrayed by the movie.

"I think older white males will have a major problem with it," said Oliver Stone. And indeed, columnist George F. Will did. To Will, "JFK" is "celluloid diatribe... cartoon history... a three-hour lie." Even worse, he dissects Stone as "45 going on 8... an intellectual sociopath."

A Newsweek cover story dismissed the movie as a "twisted truth." A Time essay eloquently poked fun at it and, in a burst of oxymoronic hyperbole, decided the film was "sedulously enthralling." New York Times sage Tom Wicker offers the most balanced assessment of "JFK" but still deplores it as "a conspiracy against reason." Wicker does acknowledge, however, that it contains a couple of plausibilities.

But the overly long, three-hour film is worth sitting through just to see its thorough discrediting, via graphics, of the one-bullet theory. This bit of ordnance fantasy was sold to the Warren Commission by a junior counsel to the Warren Commission, Arlen Specter. In the film, New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison (played by Kevin Costner) calls Specter one of the nation's "grossest liars." Commented Wicker in a bit of impish historical melding: "Some who watched Mr. Specter, now a Republican senator from Pennsylvania, during the Clarence Thomas hearings may be tempted to agree."

Of all the commentaries, only one Op-Ed piece authoritatively rebuts several of the film's premises. Co-authored by former President Gerald Ford, a member of the Warren Commission, and David W. Belin, counsel to the commission, the piece, published in The Washington Post, parallels the six rebuttals in the Sermon on the Mount. "Ye have heard it said... but I say unto you..."

"I believe with (Stone) that the impact of this film will be liberating," said Costner. "Any part of the truth — any discussion of what could be truth — can only make us free."

I have read those sentiments before. You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

Chuck Stone writes a column for The Philadelphia Daily News.



## ALSTON CHASE

It bares environmentalism motive: the government lacks moral force



**LIVINGSTON, Mont.**  
The anger borders on the pathological. For bringing us the film "JFK," Oliver Stone is being pilloried by press and pundits. He has been blasted by Newsweek, ridiculed by George Will and chided by Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan. The bipartisan nature of this tongue-lashing reveals the real significance of Stone's apostasy: "JFK" questions the moral legitimacy of our political system.

The Kennedy assassination was the first of a series of tragic events whose cumulative effect was to undermine not only government, but all institutions — including the media — which serve society. Thus it reveals much about America today, even explaining the passions that drive environmentalism. But its message is too dark for many who reside within the Beltway. So they are attacking Stone.

There is much wrong with "JFK," but there are some things right about it as well. Stone's suggestion that Kennedy was a closet dove is simply fantastical. Suffering from a "Munich complex," Kennedy was the quintessential cold warrior. But Stone is right to question the Warren Commission. That committee's intent was not to investigate but to allay public fears.

Identifying closely with government, many in the media continue to decry the "politics of distrust." If there was a plot to kill Kennedy, then our political system has a dark side that undermines the credibility not only of the government, but also of the press. Too many scribes have climbed too far out on the limb of knee-jerk denials to crawl off. And too many confuse government's interest with their own. As a colleague of Newsweek editor Gene Lyons observed not long ago, "The Washington bureau (of the magazine) is full of people who, when they say 'wc,' don't mean Newsweek but the government."

But although denials of America's loss of innocence may have been believable in 1963, they ring hollow today. We have become a sadder but wiser nation. Who, at the time of Kennedy's death, would have believed that the president was having an affair with a gangster's gal (Judith Exner), that J. Edgar Hoover, director of America's premier law enforcement agency, regularly blackmailed presidents, that Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy would be shot, and that agents working for a U.S. president (Nixon) would illegally tape the offices of political opponents?

Who among those who were adults in the 1960s does not remember his or her helplessness and despair as assassinations and violent politics thwarted the popular will? These events revealed America's dark side and eroded the moral integrity of its institutions. Stone understands this loss. At 45, he is of the generation that re-

members how, during the 1960s, normal political processes failed to end the injustices of Vietnam and racism and declined to protect the environment. Making things right prompted illegal acts — civil disobedience — which themselves further undermined government and society.

The modern environmental movement, born during those tumultuous times, represents the flip side of this disenchantment. The first Earth Day occurred two weeks before the Kent State massacre. Greenpeace was originally founded as an anti-war movement. Many of today's environmental leaders are former student activists and continue to practice the tactics of civil disobedience they learned in the 1960s. To them, nature offers an objective moral foundation that society lacks.

This was the message of "JFK": Regardless of whether there was a conspiracy or not, America lost its innocence in the 1960s. Establishment pundits can't rescue the reputation of government, because government has little reputation left to rescue. And those who would revive its moral authority cannot do so by denying it is gone. Washington must do so the old-fashioned way: by earning it.

Alston Chase writes a column distributed by Universal Press Syndicate.

## LESLIE H. GELB

Kennedy's Vietnam torments something not to be trifled with



**NEW YORK**  
On Oct. 11, 1963, President Kennedy issued top-secret National Security Action Memorandum 263. In it he called for a stepped-up training for South Vietnamese forces so they could take over the duties of U.S. forces, thus permitting the bulk of Americans to withdraw by 1965.

Based mainly on that document, Oliver Stone's "JFK" movie asks us to believe one of the great historical "ifs" of the century: that if the young president had survived through a second term, the U.S. would have been spared the ordeal of full-scale war in Vietnam.

It is fair for Stone or anyone to take up that historical sword. But on a matter that remains so raw for so many Americans, it is gross of him to distort the record, and foolish to be so confident of decisions Kennedy would have made in circumstances he never had to face.

Stone makes swaggering assertions about mighty unknowns. First, he maintains that JFK was going to abandon South Vietnam to a communist takeover. Second, he tells us that right-wingers (from the FBI and CIA to the Mafia) believed this, and killed the president to put Lyndon Johnson in the White House and ensure that the United States would stay the course in Vietnam. I am competent only to address the first point.

To begin with, NSAM 263 was grounded in one of the few periods of genuine op-

timism about the war. So JFK had some basis for believing the war might be won soon and that U.S. forces could be withdrawn — without a communist victory. Put another way, JFK might never have issued the directive if he thought it would mean losing the war.

Most officials also viewed the withdrawal memo as part of a White House ploy to scare President Diem of South Vietnam into making political reforms. The clarifying event was the coup against Diem and his powerful brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, on Nov. 1. The coup was fully supported, if not inspired, by the United States in good part because of the fear that Nhu was conspiring with North Vietnam to "neutralize" South Vietnam.

In other words, the Kennedy team felt that Diem and Nhu might be selling out to the communists. Whatever JFK's precise intentions, the removal and killing of Diem profoundly increased America's political responsibility for the war.

Some have argued that Kennedy had gained self-confidence from successes like the Cuban missile crisis and would not have felt the need to prove himself in Vietnam — as did Lyndon Johnson. Soon after the assassination, Ted Sorensen painted a more tortured picture of JFK's thinking.

"The struggle could well be, he thought, this nation's severest test of endurance and patience," the Kennedy intimates wrote. "He was simply going to weather it out, a nasty, untidy mess to which there was no other acceptable solution..."

These words carry great weight. They echoed the private soul-searching of President Eisenhower and foreshadowed almost precisely the documented dilemmas of Presidents Johnson and Nixon. These torments are not to be trifled with by Oliver Stone, or anyone, however many men shot JFK for whatever lunatic reasons on that tragic November day.

Leslie H. Gelb writes a column for The New York Times.

## ANTHONY PALMA

Stone's film confronts us with need to rescue America's soul.



The only significant error to be found in Oliver Stone's public statements concerning his rationale for "JFK" is his statement that most of the direct or indirect participants in the cover-up are dead. He is in error there. Witness how they come rushing out of the woodwork in sheer terror when someone comes digging in close to their lair.

Critics of the film who stoop to question the patriotism of its makers and backers obviously deserve contempt. But those of us who have actually fought in wars abroad, and try to continue the moral battles at home, find such characterizations of Stone repugnant.

Those identifying with his views and motives more likely possess the open minds as well as the fundamental sense of right and wrong as it should apply to the body politic. They are the inarticulate common folk who strive to keep intact the marriage between moral right and freedom that is the soul of this country.

Stone has given expression to our own unquieted concerns about that devastating assassination 30 years ago. He may have helped lift a little the suffocating shroud of political and ruthless dishonesty, by which the powerful and ruthless govern. We should be cheered by the recognition that he has pointed the finger at those power brokers, who we all know exist, who use people in the media (who have forgotten their allegiance to truth) to keep the population blind and ignorant.

Those sympathetic to Stone's work and the issues it has raised are doing their part ultimately to keep democracy and public morality alive in this nation.

Anthony Palma is a playwright who lives in Granada Hills.