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Get the Rest of the J.F.K. Story

Oliver Stone, the film maker, was wrong to use trick photography and spurious evidence to charge that the murder of John F. Kennedy was a coup by the nation's highest officials. But he is right to call for release of assassination documents that have been sealed for decades and are scheduled to remain so for decades more.

Without endorsing Mr. Stone's conspiracy theories, the Kennedy family and a growing number of public officials are giving welcome encouragement to a fuller historical account of a national tragedy. They need to press the case for wider disclosure — without illusions that new data will appease the insatiable conspiracy theorists.

America, where free speech prevails, has no official history and does not sponsor orthodox stories, impervious to new evidence, about its past. The Warren commission report, which concluded that Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone killer, never was more than a conscientious attempt to explain the crime and account for as many of its mysteries as possible. It now makes sense to release as much of the underlying evidence as possible.

The easiest disclosure would be the release of overclassified documents in files generated by the House committee that published two dozen volumes of material before running out of time and money in 1979. Its chairman, Louis Stokes, favors careful declassification. For documents generated by the

C.I.A., F.B.I., Secret Service and other agencies, the executive branch needs to designate an official to collect and screen scattered archives.

Some secrecy is defensible. Some personnel files merit continued confidentiality. Consent must be sought from some informants who spoke to investigators under promises of confidentiality. Some intelligence-gathering sources and methods still deserve respect and protection.

True, every refusal to disclose, reasonable or not, will continue to be grist for conspiracy theorists, and the newly released documents will beget new questions. But that's the American approach to information and history.

Oliver Stone, who directed the \$40 million movie "J.F.K.," is not engaged in a fair-minded inquiry. He continues to libel Clay Shaw, a New Orleans businessman who was acquitted of conspiring to kill the President. And he continues to ridicule the Warren commission's theory that one of the bullets fired in Dallas in November 1963 hit both the President and Gov. John Connally of Texas. Yet the House committee, while concluding there probably was a conspiracy, confirmed that fragments from a supposedly pristine bullet wounded the Governor.

Nevertheless, the public's right to information does not depend on the integrity or good faith of those who seek it. Congress and the executive branch would serve the public by maximizing disclosure of the facts surrounding that fateful day in Dallas.