

Opinion

JFK will never die

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Guest Columnist

Controversy continues

As a philosopher of science and student of critical thinking, I have been fascinated to discover the variety of responses that Oliver Stone's new movie has evoked. *Newsweek* offered a hatchet job, whose own authors almost certainly had not seen the film, as a cover story. George Will, normally the possessor of a rational mind, went bonkers with a sarcastic diatribe, which grossly distorted the real issues. Even that icon of the intellect, Tom Wicker, committed a fallacious appeal to pity by arguing that, if Stone were correct, then his own movie would be "contemptuous" of governmental institutions, as though the question of government were entirely beyond question.

Others assert similar views. Jon Margolis, for example, has stated that it is inconceivable that the Attorney General could have allowed his brother's killers to have gone unscathed. *Time*, by contrast, advanced a reasoned set of articles that thoughtfully considered the film from various points of view, without begging the question by taking for granted the principal thesis the movie was meant to challenge in the style of its competitor. Astonishingly, the most rational response came from Siskel and Ebert, who viewed it as a sensational attempt to reconstruct history along the lines of a speculative hypothesis about the most important unsolved murder of the 20th century.

Oliver Stone himself, under aggressive attack by Forrest Sawyer during *Nightline*, emphasized the hypothetical character of his enterprise. Beneath Sawyer's thin veil of contempt appeared an evident discomfort with hypothetical reasoning, as though the matter could be settled merely by an appeal to "the facts." Sawyer's attitude, like that of many others, seems to be that by reasoning from the "bottom up," it should be possible to discover what has happened, while Stone, by comparison, approaches the problem by reasoning from the "top down." Bottom-up reasoning tends to assume that "the facts" speak for themselves and require no interpretation, while top-down reasoning suggests the need for interpretation to discover them.

So was Oswald the assassin or not? Most of those who believe he was do so on the basis of what the government has told them in the form of a special report by the Warren Commission. But that report itself merely represents a historical reconstruction to which the available evidence may or may not lend support. Unless bullets can make mid-course corrections, for example, it may be difficult to believe that the same bullet could have passed through one body, paused to change direction and then passed through another, while remaining almost completely intact. If we accept the laws of physics, for example, then we should reject that claim.

It can be a useful exercise of the intellect to consider something closer to the full range of alternatives before committing ourselves to a specific explanation, especially one that appears to be incompatible with scientific laws. One heretofore unexplored alternative, for example, is that Kennedy is alive and well and living in Argentina. According to this scenario, the assassination was staged to create a context for Johnson to assume the office, because Kennedy lacked the clout with Congress to get his legislation through. On this reconstruction, the

three tramps who were photographed being escorted from Dealey Plaza were merely extras in an elaborate hoax.

This hypothesis provides a relatively clear example of an explanation that is incompatible with the evidence. There were shots, and Kennedy was killed. A more plausible alternative, therefore, is that a lone gunman firing from the Texas Book Depository Building struck the President down. This, of course, is the official explanation. But even assuming that Oswald had a motive, which has never been shown, it remains to be seen whether or not he had both the means and the opportunity. The best marksmen in the FBI were unable to fire three aimed shots in six seconds from the old Italian rifle with an improperly aligned scope alleged to belong to Oswald.

In fact, Oliver Stone is hardly the first investigator to conclude that the physical evidence, including the extant photographs, are incompatible with the official hypothesis. Josiah Thompson's *Six Seconds in Dallas* (1967) and Richard Sprague's *The Assassination of President John F. Kennedy: The Application of Computers to the Photographic Evidence* (Computers and Automation 1970) are meticulous studies which establish strong enough evidence to reject the basic thesis that define the Warren Commission's position. If there had to be more than three shots fired from more than one location, then the hypothesis of a single assassin cannot be sustained.

"JFK" presents an alternative that, in its detailed reconstruction of the physical events of the assassination in Dallas itself, receives more support from the available evidence than does the official hypothesis. In debates about the movie, especially in the case of *Newsweek*, there appears to be an almost irresistible temptation to treat the historical reconstruction embraced by the Warren Commission as evidence. That completely misrepresents the inferential situation, however, because the Oswald-as-the-lone assassin scenario is merely the Warren Commission's hypothesis. Serious studies of the assassination cannot afford to commit blunders of this kind.

Although Oliver Stone's hypothesis about the physical details of the assassination is therefore preferable to the Warren Commission's hypothesis, the movie is not therefore free from fault. Apart from its exercise of dramatic license in making Jim Garrison into a near-mythical romantic figure, it has too many victims and too few motives. RFK and Martin Luther King may have also died under suspicious circumstances that have never been completely settled to everyone's satisfaction, but their introduction into a film about JFK is needlessly distracting. Moreover, the problem of motivation demands more than a nebulous plot to promote a war in Vietnam.

A more plausible hypothesis than that would remain faithful to the evidence about what happened in Dealey Plaza while providing a better explanation as to why JFK was killed. An alternative that surfaces, briefly during the film, is that the assassination was actually carried out by Fidel Castro in retaliation for repeated attempts by the CIA in collusion with the mob to assassinate him. These efforts by official agencies of the United States government were not disclosed to the Warren Commission, but have emerged gradually during years since, especially through the efforts of the Church Committee and of the House

of Representatives during their own inquiries.

The hypothesis that a team of Cuban hitmen assassinated Kennedy in Dealey Plaza improves upon the Stone scenario in ascribing a very specific motive for his assassination. If there were evidence to confirm it, then it would be preferable to Stone's hypothesis as well as to the Warren Commission's hypothesis. To the best of my knowledge, evidence that would tie Castro to the assassination has never been produced, and it remains no more than a tantalizing possibility. Yet one more alternative ought to be considered, which, if true, would shed light on each of these hypotheses. That hypothesis is even more specific and more detailed and disturbing.

Suppose that a very powerful businessman had learned that he was going to be re-elected with great fanfare immediately after the next election. Paralyzed with fear, he did not know what to do. But when he found out that LBJ would be dropped as JFK's running mate, he knew where to turn. He had learned these things as he had learned most others, not through painstaking sleuthing, although that was an image he liked to cultivate, but in the same way he had discovered that JFK was fooling around with Marilyn Monroe and having an affair with Judith Exner — by technological means. It all began because J. Edgar Hoover had the White House bugged.

LBJ was one of the most ruthless and ambitious politicians in American history and did not favor the idea that he had come this far only to fail to fulfill his lifelong aspiration to be "the president of all the people." It did not take him very long to realize that, if something were to be done, then it had to be soon, certainly before JFK announced that he would not be running. That the CIA also bore a grudge against JFK. As the desperate necessity of the situation took hold of his imagination, he knew where to turn. He contacted Charles Cabell, who had formerly served as a Deputy Director for Operations of the CIA.

A Lt. General in the Air Force, Cabell had the responsibility for planning and executing the Bay of Pigs invasion. It was he who called JFK at 4 a.m. to plead for close air support, which he believed the President had previously promised. When JFK declined, the fate of many brave men on the beach was sealed. Rightly or wrongly, Cabell, like Hoover and LBJ, felt that he had been betrayed by JFK. All three had motives to see him dead. Moreover, through his contacts with the CIA and the mob, Cabell had the means to make him dead. The only thing he lacked was the opportunity, which he could secure with a little help from LBJ by getting JFK to Dallas.

As an assassination site, Dallas was perfect, not least of all because its mayor, Earle Cabell, was the brother of Charles. Like other mayors of big cities, Earle Cabell had control of the police department and public events, such as ceremonies and parades. Fixing the parade route and planning an escape for the assassins was easy enough. In true CIA style, they could be walked in public view through the plaza after the assassination, under the guard of accomplices dressed as Dallas police. According to this hypothesis, the three tramps were not ordinary tramps, but members of the team that carried out the assassina-

tion, who were captured in photographs that day.

One of the most striking features of the *Newsweek* cover story was its insistence that none of the members of the conspiracy have ever cracked, which ignored the very kind of evidence cited in a subsequent story in the same issue, Charles Harrelson, who is currently serving a life term for the assassination of a federal judge using a high-powered rifle, has long been identified as the tallest of the tramps, and he once avowed that he was the man who had killed Kennedy. The third of the tramps, who is seen with a paper bag in his hand, is Chauncey Holt, who claims that he was there delivering forged Secret Service credentials to other members of the team.

The great advantage of this hypothesis over the alternatives is that it would explain other aspects of the situation that no other explanation appears able to accommodate. Most importantly, of course, it affords a basis for understanding how a cover-up could have been carried out so swiftly and methodically, from illegally removing a body from Parkland Hospital to immediately disseminating information about an alleged assassin even before the smoke had cleared. It also tends to explain how Bobby could have been cut off from aggressively pursuing an investigation that was controlled by a superior at the White House and a subordinate at the FBI.

It also tends to explain the peculiar composition of the Warren Commission itself, which restored Allen Dulles to a position of prominence after he had been removed from the CIA by JFK and placed the nation's highest judicial officer in the compromising position of participating in an inquiry which had led to an indictment, would have made him unable to sit on the Supreme Court in judicial review of a conviction. And it left the Castro hypothesis available to persuade those who rejected that the truth must never be publicly disclosed to avert the possibility of a war with Cuba.

While I cannot guarantee that this hypothesis is true, I can maintain that it appears to provide a more adequate explanation of the available evidence than do any of the alternatives considered here. Moreover, it can be investigated further. If JFK had a huge gaping wound in the back of his head, for example, photographs that show JFK's head with a neat bullet hole near the crown of a nicely-tanned head could not possibly be authentic. And it might also explain why LBJ presented Charles Cabell with a medal during a private ceremony in 1964, perhaps using the words, "No one will ever know what you have done for your country."

In my opinion, Oliver Stone deserves our admiration and support for his astonishing attempt to confront one of our nation's greatest crimes. Although his movie is clearly flawed, it makes a major contribution by forcing us to confront something we would prefer to simply fade away. The motive that he ascribes does not seem to be completely out of the question; but as a peripheral rather than as a principal rationale. Political murders committed to avenge a sense of betrayal, to preserve the status quo, or to advance political fortunes are the stuff of which the greatest Shakespearean — and American — tragedies appear to be made.