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A Ratings Conspiracy

J.F.K.'s TV Connection? No Commission Needed

The Warren Commission's finding that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in assassinating President John F. Kennedy launched a cottage industry of skeptics and conspiracy theorists that Oliver Stone's "JFK" and its attendant publicity have upsized into a Fortune 500 conglomerate.

On the NBC morning series "A Closer Look" this week, host Faith Daniels polled her studio audience on the multiple hypotheses on the assassination. No surprise: A big majority believed that "the government" did it.

Attribute that result to the loud, echoing resonance of Stone's persuasively crafted, only partially truthful film, which leaves the distinct impression that elements of the government,

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including even then-Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, were behind Kennedy's 1963 murder in Dallas.

The media and this story are now joined at the hip, the coverage and speculation having fused so completely that one is indistin-

guishable from the other. And not surprisingly, the aroma of TV ratings is in the air.

Wednesday—the first day of the crucial February ratings sweeps—found a whopping five programs featuring various kinds of Kennedy assassination parries. It started with NBC's "Today" program (whose weeklong "Who Killed JFK?" series was to conclude today with the inevitable interview of Stone), continued with "A Closer Look," followed that evening with the syndicated series "Inside Edition," the CBS

Please see **KENNEDY, F24**



Associated Press

President and Mrs. Kennedy and Texas Gov. John Connally on the fateful day in 1963: A cottage industry becomes a conglomerate.

LATimes
2/7/92

KENNEDY

Continued from F1
 News program "48 Hours" and the KCBS-TV Channel 2 newscast at 11 p.m.

"Have you made up *your* mind on the J.F.K. assassination?" anchor Bree Walker asked during a station break advertising the local newscast. "We have another point of view you'll want to hear."

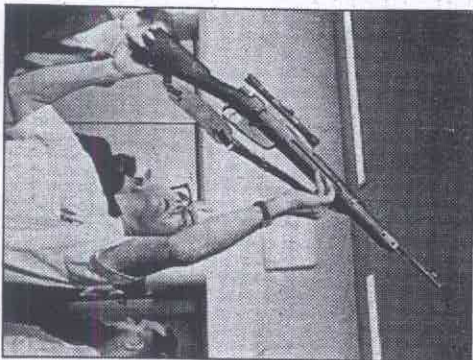
It sounded like Cal Worthington, selling conspiracy theories now instead of cars.

The Channel 2 story was a thin tie-in with "48 Hours," which—while getting its highest ratings ever (reaching 15.5 million homes)—met its goal of separating "concrete evidence from conjecture" principally by rehashing past CBS investigations of the assassination ("When the bullet passed through the President's neck . . .") and reviewing the controversy over the validity of Stone's film.

It was "Inside Edition"—consistently the most honest and journalistically responsible of TV's syndicated, tabloid-style series—that weighed in the noisiest Wednesday, promising an "exclusive" peek "inside the sealed J.F.K. assassination files the government didn't want you to see!"

What anchor Bill O'Reilly claimed to be reporting were excerpts of files from the 1976-78 probe of the J.F.K. slaying by the House Select Committee on Assassinations. Those files were said to have been ordered sealed until 2029.

The "explosive" material reported included a charge by "House investigators" that "high-ranking officials of the Central Intelligence



Dallas Sheriff J.C. Day checks Lee Harvey Oswald's rifle in "Nova" documentary airing Feb. 25.

Agency" lied to the public about Oswald and that a now-deceased CIA official named David Albee Phillips—who purportedly resented Kennedy's handling of the Bay of Pigs invasion—met with Oswald two months before the assassination.

O'Reilly also cited other material from the files that he said established a "criminal link between the CIA and Oswald."

Phillips' name has surfaced before in assassination probes. If "Inside Edition" did see these files, however, that in itself is news. O'Reilly gained access through a source who is "quite knowledgeable," said "Inside Edition" executive producer Av Westin, a former

top executive at ABC News. "He walked O'Reilly through it, pointing out what was in it and what he thought was significant." Astonishingly, Westin said that

as of midday Thursday, no news organization had called "Inside Edition" about its claim to have seen files that are presumably off-limits to the rest of the media and that—motivated by "JFK"—a growing number of Americans has been demanding be declassified by the government.

"If it had been NBC News or ABC News, I suspect it would have gotten more attention," said Westin, who protests "Inside Edition" began lumped together with law-dry series such as "Hard Copy" and "A Current Affair." "We are relegated to the dust heap," he said.

Meanwhile, cable's Arts & Entertainment network re-enters the fray with a Feb. 24-28 slab of J.F.K. assassination programming that includes a rerun of the five-part 1986 Showtime production "The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald" and a repeat of a documentary, "Who Killed JFK? On the Trail of the Conspiracies." And on "Open Mind" (at 12:30 a.m. Monday on KCET Channel 28), Stone gives his zillionth interview about "JFK," this time with Richard Heffner.

I have to take dramatic license," Stone told Dan Rather on "48 Hours" Wednesday night. The filmmaker was severely critical of the Warren Commission report and called his own account a "counter-myth." Facts, he added, "only take you so far."

Stone insisted that when his film inserts fiction, "We say *maybe*." Many who have seen it, though,

come away with the opinion that it says *absolutely*.

Not necessarily is what you get from a 1988 edition of the PBS science series "Nova" that is being rerun at 8 p.m. Feb. 25 on KCET Channel 28.

Although the title—"Who Shot President Kennedy?"—now sounds trite, this is a formidable program that, through use of sophisticated photo enhancement and three-dimensional computer modeling, methodically makes a case for the single-bullet/single assassin theory that "JFK" attacks.

The hour is meticulously fair, using only physical evidence, not politics, to examine all the arguments that have been made against the Warren Commission's conclusions. With Walter Cronkite as host, this is a sterling piece of journalism from producer Robert Richter, one that establishes only scientific plausibility, not certainty.

Better than speculation is believed as truth.