

# Forget conspiracy theories; reality's

By Christopher Phelps

Although disappointing, recent conspiracy theorist commentary in the *Guardian* on the revived controversy over the Kennedy assassination is no surprise. Carl Davidson's and Robert Spiegelman's articles (Jan. 8) are part of a long tradition of explaining political events, particularly disturbing and unexpected ones, by reference to conspiracy.

Right-wingers have their favorite conspiracies. Anti-Semites have long posited Jewish control of banking and politics. Protestants feared papal plots, and Sen. Joe McCarthy invoked "a conspiracy so immense" when he alleged Communist control of the State Department. Even today, the remnants of the John Birch Society claim that the Illuminati, a secret society, runs the government.

## No 'secret team'

But conspiracy has also at times captivated the progressive imagination. During the American Revolution, radicals often explained increasing taxation and colonial control as a monarchical conspiracy to deprive colonists of all liberties. Later, instead of seeing the Civil War as a clash of competing systems of production, many Northerners thought that a "slave power" conspired to destroy the union. In the 1890s, radical farmers often explained their desperate poverty as the result of a plot by British monarchists and financiers to recapture the republic. Most recently, the Christic Institute has promoted the idea that a "secret government" rules the United States.

Conspiracies do occur, of course; instances of political bribery come to mind. But the conspiracy theory of history—as distinguished from theories that acknowledge conspiracies sometimes exist—elevates alleged plots to the status of general conspiracies that reveal the secret rulers of the government and society. To the conspiracy theorist, conspiracy is the motor force of history.

Conspiracy theories share some attributes. They tap into public anxiety about major social problems such as political tyranny and economic stagnation; they are rooted in some aspect of reality, lending them plausibility; and they sometimes serve as a rallying cry for movements that appear anti-systemic.

For those reasons, leftist conspiracy theo-

# bad enough

ries, while irrational, cannot be dismissed as mere paranoid fantasy. They reflect progressive impulses. On the other hand, they cloud understanding in a simplistic and speculative fog. Conspiracy theories seem radical, and even function to recruit and sustain activists, but they make such a muddle of history and social analysis that in the long run they are a disservice to the left. Their radical appearance, moreover, only overshadows their actual political prescription, which more often than not is purely liberal.

Case in point: director Oliver Stone's masterful new release, "JFK."

From a purely cinematographic standpoint, the movie dazzles. It is gripping despite its length and notable if only for the array of stars backing up lead actor Kevin Costner: Ed Asner, Jack Lemmon, Walter Matthau and Sissy Spacek.

Costner plays Jim Garrison, a New Orleans district attorney who in the mid-1960s decides to reopen the files on the slaying of President John Kennedy. (Lee Harvey Oswald lived in New Orleans before the assassination in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963.) Through interviews and intense scrutiny of Warren Commission reports, Garrison concludes that Oswald could not have acted alone.

Garrison concludes that the killing was a "coup d'état" carried out by the highest-ranking U.S. intelligence and military leaders at the instigation of industrialists, with Lyndon Johnson "waiting in the wings."

The motive? According to Stone, Kennedy was a man of peace. He was fracturing the



intelligence agencies and carrying out the generous Alliance for Progress in Latin America. He refused to order backup bombing for the Bay of Pigs. He negotiated with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to wind down the Cuban missile crisis and for an above-ground nuclear test ban.

Most importantly, argues Stone, Kennedy was beginning to withdraw U.S. troops from Vietnam. The plans of the military, the power of the intelligence agencies and the profits of the major corporations were in jeopardy.

#### **Kennedy not progressive**

"JFK" seems to be a courageously radical movie, taking on the corporations and the military, and many radicals have been misled by the hostile reception the movie has received from the establishment it attacks. Mainstream pundits from Tom Wicker to Gerald Ford have denounced the film, asserting an absolute verifiability to the lone gun-

man theory or alleging that there is something suspicious about anyone who would allege that intelligence agencies could ever be involved in such malevolence.

The aspects of the film that have disturbed the mass media are, of course, its strongest points. Stone's case against the lone gunman theory is enough to create substantial doubt. And of course the CIA has assassinated heads of state and the FBI has murdered radical activists, although they usually find more subtle means to achieve their ends. The problem with "JFK" is not that it dares to question the Warren Commission or the CIA. Its flaws are in its idealized portrait of Kennedy.

If Kennedy, whom Stone wished to capture in the full image of Camelot, rode as a knight in shining armor, then it was under the bunting of the U.S. empire. Rather than challenge military and political orthodoxy, Kennedy was a classic Cold War liberal.

In Latin America, his Alliance for Progress had some poorly implemented social dimen-

sions but was mostly a cover for counterinsurgency. On other issues, Kennedy was also helpful to military and industrial interests. In the 1960 campaign he invented a "missile gap," and as president he greatly accelerated the nuclear arms race. In his first year in office alone, the military budget shot up 15

percent.

Far from blocking the Bay of Pigs operation, Kennedy was behind it from the start. In the 1960 campaign debates with Nixon, Kennedy was the first to openly back the anti-Castro rebels. As president he approved the invasion, which flopped because it failed to recognize the depth of popular support for the Cuban revolution. Operation Mongoose, which in "JFK" appears to have been kept secret from the president, was approved by Kennedy, who also authorized CIA assassination attempts on Fidel Castro's life. Kennedy also tightened the economic blockade on Cuba.

All of that aggression precipitated the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, when Kennedy took the world to the brink of nuclear war before the Soviets fortunately backed down.

Equally absurd is the film's implication that Kennedy pushed for civil rights, as in a scene when an African-American father and son stand sorrowfully before Kennedy's grave and when JFK's assassination is linked by association to the killing of Martin Luther King Jr.

Kennedy was fearful of losing the "Dixiecrats"—white Southern Democrats. He tried to convince civil rights leaders to put aside sit-ins, mass civil disobedience and Freedom Rides for voter registration drives, which he hoped would contribute to his reelection. Only after his death was the Civil Rights Act passed, a somewhat deflating fact for the movie's implication that his assassination was motivated by racist designs.

#### Backed Vietnam War

You'd never know from "JFK" that Kennedy increased U.S. troop commitments in Vietnam. Or that he initiated the Strategic Hamlet Program, which relocated villagers to barbed-wire compounds. Or that his ambassador to Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge, persuaded the CIA to machinate a military coup against the Diem regime in 1963. As in the Cuban missile crisis, Kennedy was committed to military action against "Communist aggression" in Indochina. He was not about to cut loose from Vietnam; nor was he any threat to the CIA or the military.

The effect of "JFK" is especially pernicious in an election year, when progressives will again feel pressure to back Democrats. Liberal elites have never bucked the military, the intelligence agencies or corporate rule. Electing more of them to "restore constitutional rule" or something of the sort will do nothing to alter the exploitation and oppression in this society.

Radicals should be indignant that anyone would—as Stone did in a recent appearance on "Arsenio Hall"—link the Kennedy brothers with Martin Luther King Jr. as "the three progressive leaders" of the 1960s.

The Kennedys were not progressive, and King was a movement leader, not a career politician. Left completely out of this false trio is the most damaging assassination of the decade, the murder of Malcolm X, and the loss of many other radical leaders.

#### Mass media not always wrong

Only dogmatists, who do not understand how social consent is forged, hold that everything ruling groups maintain is false. The mass media is on the mark in one aspect of its criticism of Stone: His theory of conspiracy is pure speculation. There is no proof for it, and its ascribed motive, stopping the "anti-establishment Kennedy" before he went too far, is pure fiction.

As the real 1960s radicals used to say, the issue is not the issue. Forget the assassination. Forget Kennedy. Forget the "secret team." Let's start paying attention to the actual government, which is at least as scary and worth working to transform.

Christopher Phelps writes regularly for the Portland Alliance in Portland, Ore., in which a version of this article first appeared.

The views on this page are the author's. The Guardian encourages opinion pieces that address goals, strategies and tactics for progressive movements here and abroad, comment on the news, or respond to other opinion pieces in the Guardian. Suggested length is 1,000–1,400 words. Format: typed, triple-spaced.