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Trade Views

We demand the truth, but it isn't always pretty

Amid all of the furor over Oliver Stone's "JFK," it is easy for us to forget that our world today, particularly our political world, is completely different from the world we lived in when John F. Kennedy was president. It's especially appropriate on this, the day of the New York primary, to examine the differences between politics as usual then — and now.

The current vicious political battles between the Democratic and Republican candidates for control of their respective parties would have been unthinkable 30 years ago. Considering the intense scrutiny that politicians (and sitting presidents) are now subjected to by the media, it's fascinating to learn about the actual (as opposed to the mythic) lives of John and Robert Kennedy.

In the early 1960s, the Kennedys' infidelities were widely known among the Washington press corps, but a wink and a smile protected our elected officials from public scrutiny. Camelot, indeed. For better or worse, those days — when politicians and reporters decided what the American people needed to know — are gone.

It would be interesting to know how the two Kennedy brothers would have fared under the relentless scrutiny that today's politicians face. Would we have overlooked their indiscretions?

Now, the Kennedys are no longer just politicians but icons of an earlier and better time, mythic heroes of a bygone age. Is this myth accurate? Maybe it is and maybe it isn't, but as Oliver Stone recently discovered, you tamper with a people's myths at great personal and professional peril.

The movie "JFK" was directed by a master storyteller. Oliver Stone is a highly skilled filmmaker who is very attuned to the American psyche, especially to those truths that we'd rather repress. In fact, he's so good at it, he makes people mad. It's a measure of Stone's skill as a filmmaker that people who should have known better got mad at him. Not mad at Lee Harvey Oswald or Jack Ruby or Lyndon Johnson or the CIA. They blamed Oliver Stone for opening up an old wound that has been festering for 30 years. All over the country, in print and on TV, self-righteous editorialists blamed the messenger.

While it is true that Jack Valenti is loyal to his former boss and has a legitimate right to his own opinion (HR 4/3), the fact is, very few people actually know what happened in Dallas that day so long ago. An official version of what happened was told to us by our elected officials and in those sunnier, innocent days, before Vietnam and Watergate, many of us believed the official story. Many did not, and it is to those people that Stone's film speaks.

Today we demand the truth, no matter how ugly. Not the official story. Not the myth. The truth is its own best defense. If those troublesome files were never closed, historians would have pored over them for 30 years, the debates would have reached the level of ho-hum and most people would have developed their own opinion. The idea of a movie on "JFK" might seem remote.

It's quite popular right now to bemoan the tawdry, muckraking style of this year's elections, but do any of us really wish to return to the days when reporters and press secretaries sat in smoke-filled rooms and decided for us what we needed to know? I don't think so. Would we accept the systematic burying of all pertinent files for a period of time to guarantee all of us have passed on before they could be publicly scrutinized? I think not. Oliver Stone hit a nerve. Whether right or wrong is not the point. The point is people want to know and when the files were buried they were assured they would not, and they don't like it!

4/7/92