

Does Stone Have Ax To Grind?

Stinging attack on accuracy of 'JFK'

BY TOM WICKER

MORE THAN halfway into "JFK," Oliver Stone's three-hour movie about the assassination of President Kennedy, New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison and his wife, Liz, are seen watching a television documentary about Garrison's investigation of the events of Nov. 22, 1963, in Dallas.

The documentary's anchorman is heard charging that the district attorney used improper methods to get witnesses to support his case against New Orleans businessman Clay Shaw for his part in a supposed conspiracy surrounding the murder of President Kennedy.

Kevin Costner, portraying Garrison, suggests by facial expression and dialogue that the charge is unfair and rigged to destroy his credibility — thus attacking the credibility of the documentary.

Frequently in "JFK," the district attorney alleges that the media are engaged in a coverup of a monstrous conspiracy, which Stone confidently depicts as having resulted in the assassination of a president, the war in Vietnam, the later killing of Robert Kennedy, perhaps even the murder of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

It is a measure of Stone's heavily weighted storytelling that he gives only a fleeting glimpse of that one-hour documentary, which was broadcast by NBC on June 19, 1967.

Its evidence — the script is available — establishes without doubt that Garrison and his aides threatened and bribed witnesses, who then lied in court, and that they concealed the results of a polygraph test that showed one witness, Vernon Bundy, to be lying.

So much for the advertising for the Stone film, which proclaims of Garrison: "He will risk his life, the lives of his family, everything he holds dear for the one thing he holds sacred — the truth."

In fact, of all the numerous conspiracy theorists and zealous investigators who for nearly 30 years have been peering at and probing the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Garrison may be the most thoroughly discredited — and not just by the NBC documentary.

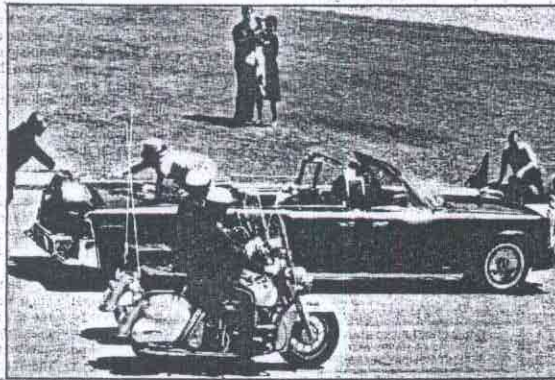
His ballyhooed investigation ended ignominiously when his chosen villain, Shaw, was acquitted; and the whole Garrison affair is now regarded, even by other conspiracy believers, as having been a travesty of legal process.

Despite all this, Garrison is clearly the film's hero. He is played by Costner, one of Hollywood's hottest box-office attractions, fresh from his triumph in "Dances With Wolves." Sissy Spacek plays his wife, and in an arrogant bit of casting against type, the real-life Garrison makes a cameo appearance as Chief Justice Earl Warren.

"JFK," which opened nationwide this weekend, stirred controversy last summer when a draft of Stone and Zachary Sklar's screenplay found its way to the press. Based chiefly on Garrison's 1968 book, "On the Trail of the Assassins," it adopts his argument that Lee Harvey Oswald — the lone presidential assassin, according to the Warren Commission — was merely a patsy put forward to shield the actions of an immense body of conspirators involved in the murder and coverup.

The controversy arose over fears that the film would develop a web of speculation and fiction around a tragic

"JFK" opened this weekend the Metro Theater.



Above, the assassination of John F. Kennedy is re-created for 'JFK,' starring Kevin Costner as Jim Garrison, top, and directed by Oliver Stone.



event of major historic significance. And indeed, it does treat matters that are wholly speculative as fact and truth, in effect rewriting history.

Stone built into his movie an all-encompassing defense. As in the scene of the television documentary, the film's Garrison repeatedly says that any critics of his thesis are either part of the great conspiracy he has conceived or are helping to cover it up. The only one of his assistants who argues and disagrees with him is shown to have been coerced by the FBI, a primary participant in Garrison's sprawling conspiracy.

Of course, any article critical of the movie — this one included — can be dismissed in the same way, as part of the alleged conspiracy or its continuing coverup. Stone has already called himself, in USA Today, a target for "a thou-

Stone insists on one true faith about the event, and he implies that anyone who doesn't share that is a part of a coverup; finally, he uses the powerful instrument of a motion picture and its stars to propagate the one true faith

sand and one vulture out there, crouched on their rocks."

These were not just "the usual Hollywood vultures," he said, but "a lot of these paid-off journalist hacks that are working on the East Coast with their receipted [sic] political theories . . ."

But there's a gaping hole in the movie's advance counter-attack: If a conspiracy as vast and consequential as the one claimed could have been carried out and covered up for three decades, why did the conspirators or their heirs allow Stone to make this movie? Why not murder him, as they supposedly murdered others? Why, for that matter, didn't they knock off Garrison himself when — as Stone tells it with so much assurance — the New Orleans district attorney began so fearlessly to follow their trail?

"JFK" begins with real footage of President Eisenhower's farewell address, in which he eloquently warned of the dangers of the "military-industrial complex." This sets up Stone's contention — borrowed, or swallowed whole, from Garrison — that generals, admirals and war profiteers so strongly wanted the war in Vietnam to be fought and the United States to stand tall and tough against the Soviets that when President Kennedy seemed to question these goals, he had to be killed so Vice President Johnson could take office. Stone clearly implies that this was done with Johnson's connivance.

"Who benefited?" asks Donald Sutherland in one of the film's frequent star turns in minor parts. (Jack Lemmon, Walter Matthau and Ed Asner provide others.) Sutherland,

playing an unnamed former military officer who sounds like any of a number of hawkish fanatics hanging around Washington, specifically names such beneficiaries as Johnson and the Bell Corp., which supplied helicopters for Vietnam.

President Kennedy, historian Stone asserts, was considered "soft on communism" after the test-ban treaty with the Soviet Union and a conciliatory speech at American University, both in 1963. No doubt some in the military and the John Birch Society held that paranoid view; but to anyone active in Washington at that time it's ridiculous to suggest that such an opinion was widely shared.

Stone's film nevertheless insists that Kennedy had so enraged the nation's hawks that the military-industrial complex, with the help of the Central Intelligence Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, actually planned and carried out the assassination, then covered it up through the Warren Commission (ostensibly set up to investigate the assassination and headed by Chief Justice Warren), with the aid of the Dallas police and the nation's press and television.

But this movie presents itself as more than speculation; it claims truth for itself. And among the many Americans likely to see it, particularly those who never accepted the Warren Commission's theory of a single assassin, even more particularly those too young to remember Nov. 22, 1963, "JFK" is all too likely to be taken as the final, unquestioned explanation.

Flashily put together under Stone's famous imprimatur and using much film footage of actual events and real people, starring the Hollywood idol Costner, and confident of its own rightness and righteousness, "JFK" may prove persuasive to audiences with little knowledge of the events presented. Asserting that the future of justice in America depends on the exposure of Stone's nightmarish visions of conspiracy, as discovered through the depicted heroism of Garrison, the film also is presented — especially in a long and weepy courtroom summation by Garrison — as a call to courage and idealism, which may appeal to a people apparently hungry for both.

BUT if "JFK" and its wild assertions are to be taken at face value, Americans will have to accept the idea that most of the nation's major institutions, private as well as governmental, along with one of its presidents, conspired together and carried out Kennedy's murder to pursue the war in Vietnam and the Cold War, then covered up the conspiracy until Garrison and Stone unearthed and exposed it.

In an era when mistrust of government and loss of confidence in institutions (the press not least) are widespread and virulent, such a suggestion seems a dubious public service, particularly since these dark allegations are only unproven speculations, and the "evidence" presented is often a stacked deck.

Kennedy, for instance, is pictured in real footage, being interviewed by Walter Cronkite on the first 30-minute broadcast of evening news by CBS, a few weeks before the assassination. The president's remarks indicated that he was becoming disillusioned with the war in Vietnam, thus seem-

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ing to support Stone's insistent thesis.

But the film does not even mention Kennedy's interview with David Brinkley a week later, when NBC began its 30-minute news program. Then, the president confirmed his belief in the "domino theory" — which suggested that the fall of Vietnam to communism would precipitate collapses in the surrounding countries in Southeast Asia.

Again, when Garrison watches the shooting of Robert Kennedy (in 1968) on television, he tells his wife that now he's "really scared." Liz Garrison, who has been doubtful of her husband's case, suddenly believes in him. This turnaround leaves the extraordinary impression that Robert Kennedy's murder somehow proved that Garrison was right about John Kennedy's murder and the great conspiracy.

Through frequent, detailed discussions of their investigation by Garrison and his assistants, Stone is merciless in his assault on the Warren Commission — not merely

the report's errors of omission and commission but the group's alleged complicity in the conspiracy and the coverup.

The Warren Commission was under time pressure; its report was hurried out, and it contains errors, omissions and debatable interpretations. Its conclusion that Oswald, acting alone, killed Kennedy, is widely disbelieved.

THE commission is a fair target for criticism of its procedures and findings; but you have to be paranoid indeed to believe that the chief justice and his colleagues deliberately framed Oswald for a crime he didn't commit, while covering the tracks of the many who were actually responsible.

After many years of consideration, I doubt that the truth about the Kennedy assassination has yet been told. It may never be. So to question what happened, to doubt the Warren Commission's or anybody's version, is legitimate, perhaps even necessary, but not conclusive.

My dissent from Stone's film is not that he believes that Oswald was a patsy or there was a conspir-

acy or even that he depicts the conspiracy as fascist, a corruption of constitutional government so far-reaching as to threaten the end of the democratic system in America. He has a right to believe those things, even to believe against the evidence that Garrison's shabby investigation was a noble and selfless search for truth.

But I and other Americans have an equal right not to believe such things, a right to our own beliefs. Stone insists on one true faith about Nov. 22, 1963 — as though only he and Garrison could discern the truth, among the many theories of what happened that terrible day. Moreover, he implies that anyone who doesn't share his one true faith is either an active part of a coverup or passively acquiescent in it.

Finally, he uses the powerful instrument of a motion picture, and relies on stars of the entertainment world, to propagate the one true faith — even though that faith, if widely accepted, would be contemptuous of the very constitutional government Stone's film purports to uphold. ■