

Oliver Stone Combats Criticism For Touching a Nerve With 'JFK'

By Robert Scheer
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Hollywood

It's not Vietnam, Salvador or even Dealey Plaza in Dallas, just the dubbing stage at Skywalker Sound in Santa Monica. But Oliver Stone is once again at war.

"Call me a guerrilla historian," Stone says, munching a turkey sandwich while the last frame of the famous Zapruder 8mm "home movie" showing President Kennedy getting his head blown off plays over and over on the screening room wall. Stone has been holed up for 18-hour days editing his film "JFK" (opening today at Bay Area theaters) while fighting a rear-guard action against the intense criticism his new and most provocative film has engendered, sight unseen.

"JFK" has been attacked by Dan Rather on CBS, by Tom Wicker in the New York Times, by Rosemary James in the New Orleans Times-Picayune, among others. Newsweek headlined its story, "Why Oliver Stone's New Movie Can't Be Trusted." The Advocate called it "the most homophobic movie ever to come out of Hollywood."

Sacred Territory

His critics resent the already controversial director's poaching on the sacred land of the Kennedy assassination, rearranging the relics and breathing life into the ghosts. Some don't like his attacks on the Warren Commission's Lee Harvey Oswald-did-it-alone conclusion. Others detest his portraying former New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, who brought the only case to trial in the Kennedy assassination, as a hero played by Kevin Costner. And the movie's larger-than-life thesis blaming the assassination on a secret parallel government nested in the military-industrial complex strikes some as bizarre.

Stone is alternately perplexed and angry over the critical articles and columns, which have made a free-fire zone around his movie even before its opening. He is ap-



Conspiracy theorist Jim Garrison plays Earl Warren in 'JFK'

prehensive, combative and can even appear hurt. Then he suddenly flashes an impish grin and one senses he's having a ball. Stone at 45 evidences the outrage lightly laced with glee of one who is sitting just where he belongs.

The Zapruder frame, taken by an amateur photographer present at the assassination, enlarged in frightening detail, is crucial to Stone's cinematic indictment of the official Warren Commission Report. In the final scenes of the movie, Costner uses it to illustrate how the bullet forced the president's head "back and to the left," indicating the fatal shot came from somewhere other than where Oswald was said to be standing.

The Hard Way

In an industry built on recycling pleasing myths into profit, Stone insists on doing it the hard way. His are countermyths. Stone,

a twice-wounded Vietnam veteran, views "JFK" as digging deeper into what he sees as the origins of that war and nothing less than "a battle over the meaning of my generation with the likes of Dan Quayle, a battle between official mythology and disturbing truth."

With his rumped sports jacket and sense of easily outraged idealism, the always irreverent Stone bears the unmistakable marks of the Kennedy generation. It is not that either he or his movie exaggerates the accomplishments of the brief Kennedy presidency. Rather, like many of his generation, Stone persists in mourning an innocence lost.

The assumption of "JFK" is a forgiving one: that for Kennedy, the CIA-sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961 and the dispatching of the first troops to Vietnam the same year were merely blunders on an otherwise noble course, and he quickly recognized the error of his ways. After the October 1962 missile crisis, Kennedy reneged on his pledge to support another invasion of Cuba, and just before his death he had signed an order withdrawing 1,000 troops from Vietnam.

Kennedy's Enemies

Stone's contention is that the true Kennedy is the man who agreed to a nuclear test ban treaty and initiated the Alliance for Progress economic aid program, and that hard-liners within the government and military were alarmed by this evidence of his dovishness.

"JFK" finds many candidates for an assassination team in the ranks of disillusioned Cubans and the American military-industrial complex. Kennedy was succeeded by Lyndon B. Johnson, who is portrayed in the film as the servant of

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the economic interests and jingoistic parties that benefited from the vast escalation of the Vietnam War.

Some of the criticism of Stone centers on his use of romantic hero Costner as Garrison. Garrison was sharply criticized at the time for linking New Orleans merchant Clay Shaw to the CIA, anti-Castro Cubans and others in a far-ranging conspiracy to kill the president — a conspiracy that he could not prove in court. (New Orleans Times-Picayune writer Rosemary James called Stone “a gullible from La-La Land” for his efforts to “regurgitate all that garbage” about Garrison’s case, which she believes has been thoroughly discredited.)

Rebel Hero

But Garrison was also a rebel hero for some, making him a natural subject for Stone, who with movies such as “Platoon,” “Born on the Fourth of July” and “The Doors” has fought a battle for the soul of the '60s. Stone is compelled by what he self-mockingly terms a “demon countercultural drive” to stick his cameras into the most sensitive national wound, attempt to solve the most puzzling of mysteries, champion a widely discredited lawman and take on the CIA, the FBI, the Joint Chiefs, LBJ, the Mafia and the Washington Post.

“So I’ve created a countermyth to the official one — is that so bad?” he asks, one of his trademark sucker questions designed to throw a challenger off guard.

It is understandable why Stone would make provocative political films, given his past experiences recounted in “Platoon.” But why would Warner Bros., united in a partnership with Time-Life, bankroll this excoriating view of the American Establishment? Is this a ruling-class death wish? Is it, as Stone puts it only half joking, that “the Establishment is obviously cracking and fissuring”?

THE OFFICIAL STORY

The official version of Kennedy's assassination is this:

■ He was fatally shot Nov. 22, 1963, while riding in a motorcade through downtown Dallas by a lone gunman stationed at a sixth-floor window of the Texas School Book Depository.

■ Shortly after the shooting, Lee Harvey Oswald, an employee of the depository who fled the building moments after the shooting, was arrested and charged with the murder of Kennedy and a Dallas policeman. Oswald denied both murders under questioning; two days later, as he was being transferred from the city jail to county jail, he was shot and killed by Dallas nightclub owner Jack Ruby.

■ A special presidential commission chaired by Chief Justice Earl Warren investigated the shooting, and on Sept. 24, 1964, issued a report that stated Oswald was the lone assassin.

Stone says that signing Costner for “JFK” was a crucial break for the film and not just because of the actor’s box-office appeal. “Kevin was the perfect choice for Jim Garrison because he reminds me of those Gary Cooper, Jimmy Stewart qualities — a moral simplicity and a quiet understatement. He listens well. He anchors the movie in a very strong way. He guides you through it because you empathize with him, and his discoveries become yours. Through Kevin playing Jim you get on the 50-yard line for the Kennedy assassination.”

Against Character

But while Costner is believable, the real-life character he plays, Garrison, is not. Flamboyant, am-

bitious, carousing and quick of mouth, Garrison burst into the national media with a series of wild charges. When he brought Clay Shaw to trial in March 1967 on charges of conspiracy to kill Kennedy, after many delays, two years later a jury took only an hour to declare Shaw innocent.

Garrison picked up enemies in the news media along the way who have now risen in outrage at the thought that decades later, Stone has cast this fellow in a heroic role.

"Dallas in Wonderland: How Oliver Stone's Version of the Kennedy Assassination Exploits the Edge of Paranoia" is how the Washington Post headlined a piece by its national security correspondent, George Lardner, who had crossed swords with Garrison while covering the original trial. Lardner criticized the unauthorized early draft of the script, Lardner proceeded to challenge what he considers "the absurdities and palpable untruths in Garrison's book and Stone's rendition of it."

Weak Case

Lardner points out that Garrison lost his case linking New Orleans merchant Shaw with an assassination conspiracy and therefore might be presumed to have defamed an innocent man. He adds that Garrison embellished a weak case by picking on the man's homosexual relations to prove guilt by possible association.

Not so, says Stone, who documents Shaw's connection with the CIA, which had been denied on the stand, and then goes on to provide photographs and eyewitness accounts linking Shaw to the assassination. "He was in the CIA according to (CIA director) Richard Helms, spotted by numerous witnesses with Lee Oswald and David Ferrie (the man Garrison thought was the getaway pilot for the Dallas assassins), whom he denied knowing. So don't give me this jive about his being an innocent man.



Clay Shaw (Tommy Lee Jones) is linked to a conspiracy in 'JFK'

He was a perjurer at the very least."

He adds that members of the jury when interviewed said they did believe there was a conspiracy to kill Kennedy.

It is true that the case against Shaw was weak. The movie itself contains powerful voices, including that of Sissy Spacek, playing Garrison's long-suffering and eventually divorced wife, arguing persuasively at one point in the movie that Shaw's rights were being violated in a witch hunt. The defection of a key Garrison staffer shown in the movie, is supported by a strong criticism detailing the failure of the Garrison enterprise.

"Even paranoids have enemies," Stone answers.

At the film's conclusion, the fact that many of the government's records on the assassination have been sealed until the year 2029 is an end title on the screen. If the audience leaves the theater with an apprehensive and questioning buzz and a heightened suspicion of official truth, who blame Oliver Stone?