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Who Is Rewriting History?

By Oliver Stone

Members of the media establishment get upset when art gets political, especially when they disagree with the politics and fear the viewpoint. When this priesthood is challenged as the sole or privileged interpreters of our history, they bludgeon newcomers, wielding heavy clubs like "objectivity" and charging high crimes like "rewriting history."

The leading detractors of my film "J.F.K." have been political journalists like Tom Wicker of The New York Times, George Lardner of The Washington Post, Dan Rather of CBS News and Kenneth Auchincloss at Newsweek, all of whom covered events of that period.

I think what is clear from their efforts to destroy my film's credibility is that history may be too important to leave to newsmen. And that artists certainly have the right — and possibly the obligation — to step in and reinterpret the history of our times. Was it not Dan Rather who, upon viewing Abraham Zapruder's film of the assassination, reported that the fatal shot to the head drove President Kennedy "violently forward." Years later, when the film was finally shown to the American people, it was clear that Kennedy's head was going backward.

My critics are outraged that I pose the view that Kennedy's desire to wind down the cold war and the Vietnam War is a possible motive for the murder. When a leader of any country is assassinated, the media normally ask: "What political forces were opposed to this leader and would benefit from his assassination?"

Oliver Stone directed and co-wrote the screenplay for 'J.F.K.'

It seems a little strange to me, 28 years later, that such a question was rarely asked once it was established that Lee Harvey Oswald was not simply mentally ill. And that in its stead, the dramatic cover story, with Lee Harvey Oswald as sole assassin and Jack Ruby as earnest vigilante, was immediately substituted and accepted by almost the entire American media (in sharp contrast to the foreign media). A great John Wayne movie, but why? Why was the possibility of a political motive rarely discussed (or only vaguely attributed to diversionary theories involving pro-Castro forces or the Mafia) after it was clear that there was evidence that undercut the Warren Report?

Whether or not there was a fundamental difference between Kennedy's and Johnson's Vietnam policies deserves more debate. For years most historians assumed there was no basic difference. But people like John Newman, an Army major in intelligence who has written a book on the subject, Fletcher Prouty, a former Air Force colonel who served as director of special operations at the Pentagon in the early 60's, and Peter Dale Scott, a professor at the University of California at Berkeley, should have their day in court.

A basic chronology underlies their view. In June 1963 in a speech at American University, Kennedy envisions a world without the cold war and arms race. He sets the stage for détente, defying the "military-industrial complex," a phrase coined by Eisenhower. Kennedy and Khrushchev have already negotiated the first step: a modus vivendi on the Cuban problem (no Soviet missiles, no U.S. invasion). In July 1963 they install the nuclear hotline and in August sign the first-ever nuclear test-ban treaty.

Later in August, Gen. Charles de Gaulle of France proposes a reunited, neutral Vietnam and plans to visit Kennedy in February to talk about it.

Behind the media establishment's anger over 'J.F.K.'

In September, Kennedy states that the war is Vietnam's, not ours, to decide and then he approves secret negotiations with Fidel Castro outside State Department-C.I.A. channels. In October, the White House forecasts that 1,000 men would be withdrawn from Vietnam by the end of 1963 and that the U.S. military mission would be over by the end of 1965. That same month, Kennedy authorizes the pullout in a national security action memo — NSAM 263. The Government projects major Pentagon cuts.

Kennedy is killed on Nov. 22. Two days later, Lyndon Johnson meets with Henry Cabot Lodge and the Joint Chiefs of Staff about the Vietnam "crisis." Four days after the assassination, Johnson overrides NSAM 263 with NSAM 273 — step one in reversing Kennedy's direction. A "withdrawal" occurs on paper — 1,000 men are rotated home — but more are sent back to Vietnam by February. Johnson's NSAM 273 opens the way for air attacks on North Vietnam and increased covert warfare. Finally, in August 1964, Johnson uses the bogus Tonkin Gulf incident to start the air war and win a Congressional mandate to do as he sees fit in Vietnam.

By March 1965, 15 months after Kennedy's death, the first combat troops are sent, something Kennedy refused to do. No difference between Kennedy and Johnson on Vietnam? With the nexus of interest — military, business, political — standing to profit from the hundred-billion-dollar war, there's ample reason to believe that therein lies the motive.

Jim Garrison, though some have tried to discredit him, sought that motive and in suggesting the possibility of a nightmare unacceptable to our official historians, he has been vilified through time. The failure of his case against Clay Shaw cannot be equated

with a full vindication of the Warren Report. To bring a case against the covert apparatus of this country was nigh impossible then, as it is now with Lawrence Walsh's failure to find the light of day against Oliver North and the Iran-contra plotters.

The issue of our times — as the media keep repeating — is democracy. Real democracy is not some illusion and must be based on truth told to the people. We applauded the Soviets when, in the name of democracy, they finally told their people the horrible truth of Stalin's murders, yet we ignore the murder of our President: Do our people deserve any less? If Kennedy was killed by a political conspiracy of his opponents and it has been covered up, then our so-called democratic system has betrayed us.

The real issue is trusting the people with their real history. The real issue is opening all the files of the House Select Committee on Assassinations, embargoed until 2029, today. The real issue is opening all C.I.A., F.B.I. and military intelligence files, held for all eternity, on Oswald, Ruby, Kennedy and Dallas 1963. All of them — without the crucial parts blacked out. Only then can we start to have a real democracy. "J.F.K." strikes a blow for that open debate. □

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