

Analysis

The Way It Wasn't

In 'JFK,' Stone Assassinates the Truth

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Oliver Stone knows how to make a movie. It's too bad he doesn't know how to tell the truth.

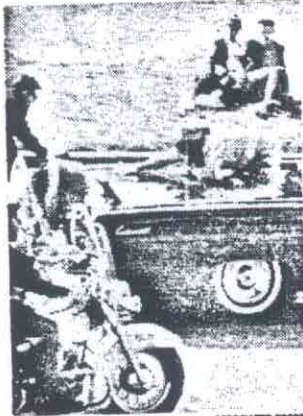
"JFK," Stone's film on the assassination of President Kennedy, is a powerful, unsettling work that can hold an audience rapt for more than three hours without a break. It is also a skillful piece of propaganda. Stone's purpose is clear. He wants to take history and shape it, his way. He wants it to be our memory of the Kennedy assassination.

"Like Shakespeare shaped 'Henry V,'" he told the Dallas Morning News last spring. "I'm not saying I'm as good as Shakespeare, but I'm using that as an example."

Stone mixes fact and fiction at dizzying speed, stomping on presumptions of innocence, cooking up fake admissions, ignoring contrary evidence, and giving a conspiratorial tone to inconsequential facets of the tragedy that were explained long ago.

Take, for example, a riveting scene in which Stone's hero, former New Orleans district attorney Jim Garrison, interrogates his chief suspect, a former airline pilot named David Ferrie, shortly after the real-life Garrison's bizarre investigation of the assassination was disclosed in the New Orleans States-Item in February 1967.

Afraid for his life, Ferrie is installed by Garrison's office at a New Orleans motel and, under questioning, states frantically that he not only knew Lee Harvey Oswald, but that Oswald worked for the CIA, along with another



The reenactment of the shooting in "JFK."

er Garrison suspect, Clay Shaw, and a motley assortment of Cubans.

"Shaw's an untouchable," Ferrie says in the scene. "Shaw, Oswald, the Cubans, all agency."

It is all make-believe. Not even Garrison ever attributed such remarks to Ferrie, who died a few days later.

Baseless claims come like fastballs. At one point, Garrison charges that after the assassination, "President Johnson orders the blood-soaked limousine, filled with bullet holes and clues, to be immediately washed and rebuilt."

In fact, says veteran assassination researcher Harold Weisberg, LBJ had nothing to do with the scrub-down.

"It was immediately washed in Dallas by the Secret Service at Parkland Hospital," Weisberg says. "Before the president was pronounced dead, Johnson was inside the hospital, guarded and incommunicado."

The distortions begin before the opening credits stop rolling, with a Sept. 2, 1963, interview Kennedy gave Walter Cronkite to inaugurate CBS television's first 30-minute evening news broadcast.

Stone's key theme, taken from Garrison's 1988 book, "On the Trail of the Assassins," is that elements of the military-industrial complex had Ken-

nedy killed to keep him from withdrawing military personnel from Vietnam. A compliant Lyndon Johnson was installed in his place. Stone uses an excerpt from the Kennedy interview to suggest that the president is becoming sour on the war and thinking of pulling out.

"Unless a greater effort is made by the government [of South Vietnam] to win popular support, I don't think that the war can be won out there," Kennedy is quoted as saying. "In the final analysis, it is their war. They are the ones who have to win it or lose it."

What moviegoers aren't told is that Kennedy went on to say that he disagreed with those who advocated withdrawal of the thousands of U.S. advisers dispatched to Vietnam under his stewardship, building up to a total of some 16,500. "That would be a great mistake," he told Cronkite. "... this is a very important struggle even though it is far away. ... We ... have to participate—we may not like it—in the defense of Asia."

LBJ is portrayed as signing a National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) a few days after the murder that, according to the film's narrator, "essentially reverses Kennedy's new withdrawal policy and gives a green light to covert action against North Vietnam, which provoked the Gulf of Tonkin incident."

The trouble with that is that the NSAM in question, No. 273, did not "reverse," but rather was a continuation of Kennedy's policy, including a planned withdrawal of 1,000 U.S. military personnel before the end of the year. In fact, the memo was drafted on Nov. 21, the day before Kennedy's death, on the assumption that he would sign it, covert action section and all.

"This demolishes the whole argument that Kennedy had decided to pull out, that he would not have continued the war," says William Gibbons, author of a multivolume history of the Vietnam War for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "I don't think there's any question that Kennedy would have signed it. You don't gin up something like that without knowing what he wants. It was all laid on and ready to be done."

The 1,000-troop withdrawal, adds Stanley Karnow, author of "Vietnam: A History," was just "a gimmick."

"They were going to put the guys back in again," Karnow says. "They were taking them out for Christmas. ... It was by no means the beginning of a withdrawal. The evidence is that Kennedy thought Vietnam was the place to be."

As for a military-industrial conspiracy, says Lt. Col. Andrew F. Krepinovich, another Vietnam historian, "the notion of people plotting to make sure we got into Vietnam is really ludicrous. The U.S. military was having enough problems building up conventional forces to meet Kennedy's doctrine of flexible response. And after the Korean War, there was sort of a 'never again' club formed—never again be tied down in a land war in Asia."

On the same day LBJ approved NSAM 273—Nov. 26, 1963—the movie depicts the new president meeting with his military brass and telling them: "Gentlemen, I want you to know I'm not going to let Vietnam go like China did. I'm personally committed. And I'm not going to take one soldier out of there until they know we mean business in Asia." Johnson then adds: "Just get me elected and I'll give you your damn war."

Stone writes in *Premiere* magazine that the last line comes from Karnow's book, which said LBJ actually made the statement to the Joint Chiefs at a 1963 Christmas Eve cocktail party. The filmmaker said "we took the liberty" of transposing the comment to the Oval Office.

But Karnow says he cited the reported remarks as an example of LBJ's assuaging the brass "with promises he may have never intended to keep." On top of that, Gibbons says Johnson didn't even meet with the brass on Christmas Eve, as Karnow has it, or on Nov. 26, as Stone does.

Stone claims artistic license for his work. I don't know who gave him his license, but he ought to be arrested for reckless driving.

George Lardner has covered the Kennedy assassination since 1963.