



The case for conspiracy — Kevin Costner as Jim Garrison faces the press in

Warner Brothers

Review/Film

When Everything Amounts to Nothing

By VINCENT CANBY

IN one of the dizzying barrage of images with which Oliver Stone begins "J. F. K.," President Dwight D. Eisenhower is seen on television not long before he left office in 1961. It is one of Ike's finer moments.

There he is, the former five-star general, the man who salvaged the Presidency for the Republican Party, warning the American people to beware of the military-industrial complex, a vested interest that, one might reasonably suppose, was oriented more toward the Republicans than the Democrats.

"J. F. K." goes on for another three hours or so. Yet as busy and as full of exposition as it is, it never becomes much more specific than Ike. The conspiracy that, "J. F. K." says, led to the assassination of Eisenhower's successor, John F. Kennedy, in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, remains far more vague than the movie pretends.

According to "J. F. K.," the conspiracy includes just about everybody up to what are called the Government's highest levels, but nobody in particular can be identified except some members of the scroungy New Orleans-Dallas-

Galveston demimonde.

That the subject is hot is apparent from all the criticism the movie received even before it was completed. The ferocity of that outrage should now subside, in part because "J. F. K.," for all its sweeping innuendos and splintery music-video editing, winds up breathlessly but running in place.

The movie will continue to infuriate people who possibly know as much about the assassination as Mr. Stone does, but it also shortchanges the audience and at the end plays like a bait-and-switch scam.

"J. F. K." builds to a climactic courtroom drama, the details of which it largely avoids, to allow Kevin Costner, the film's four-square star, to deliver a sermon about America's future with an emotionalism that is completely unearned.

What the film does do effectively is to present the case for the idea that there actually was a conspiracy, rather than the lone gunman, Lee Harvey Oswald, specified by the Warren Commission report. Beyond that "J. F. K." cannot go with any assurance. This is no "All the President's Men." The only payoff is the sight of Mr. Costner with tears in his eyes.

The film's insurmountable problem is the vast amount of material it fails to make coherent

J. F. K.

sense of Mr. Stone and Zachary Sklar, who collaborated on the screenplay, take as their starting point Jim Garrison's book, "On the Trail of the Assassins."

Mr. Garrison, played in the film by Mr. Costner, is the former New Orleans District Attorney who, five years after the assassination, unsuccessfully prosecuted Clay Shaw, a New Orleans businessman, in connection with the Kennedy murder.

To give the film something resembling conventional shape, Mr. Stone has turned Mr. Garrison into what he describes as "a Frank Capra character," that is, a plain, dedicated down-home fellow called Jim, someone who represents "the best American traditions."

Like millions of Americans, the movie's Jim admires President Kennedy and mourns him when he is murdered. But Jim also comes to see Kennedy as the 20th century's great fearless dove, whose death might be traced, if only the facts were allowed to come out, to everyone who benefited from his death. These would include

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