

Counter Unintelligence

Oliver twists the truth



If we can't trust this man, who can we trust?

BY STEVE ERICKSON

FIRST OF ALL, I WANT TO MAKE SOMETHING clear. I did not shoot John Kennedy. On the 22nd of November 1963 I wasn't in either Dallas or New Orleans, but my eighth-grade English class at Patrick Henry Junior High School in the San Fernando Valley. At least 20 or 30 people saw me there. I can't prove that I wasn't working for the CIA at the time, or that the other 20 or 30 kids in the class weren't either. But it seems important to note this because, according to Oliver Stone's new film about the Kennedy assassination, *JFK*, the only three people beyond suspicion in the crime are Stone, Kennedy himself, and Lee Harvey Oswald.

By the time you read this *JFK* will be a week old in the movie theaters and the matter of the assassination will have been exhumed and examined by everyone everywhere. This is the clear benefit of the film, and I don't have anything to add to it. The film's conspiracy theory will leave audiences choosing their positions occasionally on the basis of the facts and at least as often on the basis of some psychic need to believe whatever it is people believe. Oliver Stone is a quintessential American filmmaker because he shares with all Americans an abhorrence for moral ambivalence. This is a tendency that disguises itself as some relentless pursuit of the truth when in fact it inevitably involves a pre-judgment of the truth. On one of those Sunday-morning yellathons some weeks ago where "journalists" give their profession a bad name, a woman reporter for *Newsweek* sniffed that she was the "perfect juror" for the William Smith rape trial because she was pro-Kennedy on the one hand and pro-women on the other. No one batted an eye. No one raised the question of what either affection for the Kennedys or a feminist agenda had to do with the question of whether Smith committed this particular crime. The truth has been agendized by the agenda-makers since time immemorial, and it's no doubt naive to be complaining now simply because the ideologues of the 20th century have been so bald about it.

Because Stone has the mind of a totalitarian and the soul of a crybaby, he couldn't be expected to understand why *JFK* is an act of such monumental bad faith. All great artists are benevolent dictators at best, but Stone crosses a line into totalitarian filmmaking, not simply because more trivial truths get trampled in the stampede of his Greater Truth, but because the

Greater Truth becomes an all-consuming justification for the trampling, which is to say for lying. The difference between a totalitarian and an authoritarian is that the latter remains a tactician while the former is an idealist. Hitler was the ultimate totalitarian idealist. His vision of the universe was so pure and uncompromising that it passed through the moral variation of an Einsteinian reality-twist into nihilism, where ur-Belief becomes sur-Belief and then no-Belief. History presently makes this more possible rather than less. When people say that history is at an end what they mean, without always knowing it, is that history has been exhausted by memory and exploitation, not only in ideological terms but comprehensive ones. History reinvents itself faster than we can. Many of us who make movies or write novels or whatever it is we do find that

history's the only thing left that outpaces our imagination, and that shattering Definitive History is more truthful than embracing it. Stone would have us believe that this is what he's doing in *JFK* when in fact his own agenda doesn't allow for the ambiguities of obliterating the Definitive but rather insists on its own absolutes. If an objective analysis of the facts led to the conclusion that Fidel Castro assassinated Kennedy, does anyone think for one moment that Oliver Stone would ever have said so? Does anyone think he would have made the movie at all?

A "countermyth," Stone has called *JFK* in a number of recent interviews. Horseshit. *JFK* never for a moment means to be a countermyth; it presents itself from the opening epigram to

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the closing dedication as a cry of truth, manifested by a maelstrom of "facts" some of which are real and some of which aren't and some of which may or may not be and no one knows. Starting at Point A, where the film effectively trashes the report of the Warren Commission that Lee Harvey Oswald was the sole killer of the president, and ending at Point Z, where Stone explicitly or implicitly argues that the government, the Pentagon, the corporations, the CIA, the FBI, the Mafia, the Dallas police, the media, a bunch of pissed-off Cubans, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon conspired to murder John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, the audience is left to chart for itself the point — K maybe, Q perhaps — where fact slips into speculation and then back, and then back again. The barrage of "information" is dizzying. Kevin Costner, in his iconic portrayal of New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, who investigated the assassination in the late '60s, wonders aloud if someone snuck into the morgue and got Oswald's palm print on the rifle from his dead body, and then we see it happening in staged black-and-white "documentary" footage to be utterly confused with real black-and-white documentary footage interwoven throughout the movie. Garrison has the full dimensions of the plot laid out for him in a meeting in Washington with someone who calls himself X, a meeting which in fact never took place with a man who in fact never existed, except to the extent that he's so loosely based on some Joint Chiefs of Staff flunky that Stone couldn't even

use the real name, and in whose mouth Stone has put his own ideas. Stone's essential question isn't who killed Kennedy but why, and the answer evolves from retaliation for the Bay of Pigs (in which Kennedy failed to support a Cuban insurrection) to a dedicated perpetuation of the Vietnam War. An intelligent woman I know in her mid-30s, no less knowledgeable about this period of time than most people, walked out of the film with the distinct impression that there was an articulated policy by Kennedy to withdraw from Vietnam. I had to explain to her that there was no such policy. I had to explain that the policy of the Kennedy Administration had been not to de-escalate the American involvement but to step it up, and that the suggestion he would have withdrawn from Vietnam after the 1964 election was only conjecture, perhaps wishful thinking by all of us.

We're all guilty of wishful thinking. It's one of the things that makes us Americans. My own instinct — and what do I know? — is that Kennedy might well have withdrawn from Vietnam, since his political ego displayed more capacity for admitting error than did the two presidents who followed him. His cold-blooded caution was balanced by a recklessness, in his private and public life (his whole campaign for the presidency was an arrogant gamble), that made him unpredictable. It's odd that such a man, who revealed more appreciation for ambiguity than most politicians, should capture the imagination of a generation that insisted on denying those ambiguities, casting Kennedy in the role of a romantic radical who was going to Gorbachev American society and American politics. This generation couldn't stand the idea that America was never really that innocent and things were never really that simple. It's partly this dispossessed innocence of America that insists on believing Kennedy's murder wasn't a random act by some wacko up on the sixth floor of a warehouse. Acknowledgement of such chaos is as antithetical to American nature as the truth that won't stop being complicated and the righteousness that can't keep its hands clean. If such chaos is loose in the world then destiny is not always ours to determine and the American resolution of all problems is not always ours to will into being; there's a latent suspicion deep in the soul of America, enhanced by the edges of American political thinking, that recognizing the chaos that can't be personified is the first step toward national crackup. We can't afford the bright red flashing chaos of convictions and events and relationships in the moral chiaroscuro of who we've decided we are.

As it happens, I accept many of the narrow premises of Stone's movies. I agree that Vietnam was an obscene blunder, that the meaning of America has degenerated from justice and courage to consumption and cash, that the Doors were a great rock band and that Lee Harvey Oswald was probably not the only guy who shot the president in November 1963, assuming he was involved at all. This last is no doubt partly because my own American innocence is no less awkward and simplistic than anyone else's; but in fact I believe this about the assassination not because I want to but despite the fact I don't, simply because it seems to me a common-sense conclusion from the facts, which include Oswald's reputation as a particularly poor marksman, the unlikely number of rounds fired off in a short period of time, the absurd damage that a single bullet would have to have inflicted on both Kennedy and Texas Governor John Connally, the ghostly ease with which Jack Ruby dispatched Oswald in a scene filled with security cops, the witnesses who saw shots from behind the hedge on the other side of Dealey Plaza and

FOR ADDITIONAL FILM REVIEWS, SEE THE CALENDAR FILM SECTION ON PAGE 47.

JFK

Directed by
OLIVER STONE
Screenplay by
OLIVER STONE and
ZACHARY SKLAR
Produced by
A. BRITAIN and
OLIVER STONE
Starring
KEVIN COSTNER,
TOMMY LEE JONES,
GARY OLDMAN and
SISSY SPACEN
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Warner Bros.
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JFK

the transfixing disappearance of other witnesses over the years. The unhappy result of Stone's movie is that it won't open up people's thinking about all this but will finally close it down. It won't make these questions harder to dismiss but easier, because *JFK* is no more credible than the Warren Commission Report and in some ways actually achieves the remarkable distinction of being less. As Jim Garrison makes his courtroom summation in the film's closing minutes, with the scope of his arguments against accused conspirator/assassin/ex-CIA-operative Clay Shaw getting wilder by the moment, your heart sinks to realize that if you were sitting on this jury and had half a brain you'd acquit Shaw too: once outside the vortex of *JFK* it's impossible to figure out just what Garrison's — and Stone's — case against Shaw is, except that he's played by Tommy Lee Jones as a cajun Caligula who just slithered his way out of a vat of Vaseline. The movie's most characteristic leap of logic occurs when Robert Kennedy is assassinated. "They got him," Garrison says to his sleeping wife, who for two and a half hours has been shrieking about their disintegrating marriage while her husband's been trying to save the Republic. "My God, you were right then, it's true," she answers, now having finally seen the light. The assassination of Robert Kennedy, in other words, is Stone's smoking gun in the assassination of John Kennedy. It also does wonders for the Garrisons' sex life.

When Oliver Stone calls the Warren Commission Report a myth, he means myth as in a lie. When he calls *JFK* a myth, he means myth as in "inner truth." It's one thing to deal with history as metaphor, to print the legend rather than the truth when the legend is better, as John Ford put it; increasingly, as the facts of history become more kaleidoscopic, it may be the only way we can deal with history and understand what it really means. *JFK*, however, doesn't present history as a metaphor, it presents history as an investigation of facts, and a hundred post-production damage-control magazine interviews by the director won't change the fact that people will walk out of *JFK* not more but less illuminated about the truth of which Stone has anointed himself champion. However many loopholes Stone has built into the enterprise with passing comments here and there that maybe it's all just speculation, the movie itself doesn't believe such caveats for a single frame, and in its jacked-up technique, its imagistic vertigo and off-camera explosions, *JFK*'s strategy is to first dumbfound the audience and then bully it into accepting Stone's particular version of clarity. It's sickening that Hollywood and the culture it services with one celluloid blowjob after another have become so bankrupt that Oliver Stone is considered a heavy thinker just because he's the only one audacious enough to film his generically titled name-brand controversies and the only one talented enough to not be boring about it. If those of us who share Stone's anguish about what has happened to our country leave to the likes of *Newsweek* the job of calling him on his hypocrisy — and if you remember how *Newsweek* "disproved" the October Surprise a month or so ago, you know their credibility is about what Stone's is — then we've conceded our own intellectual corruption in the process, and no agenda will survive or redeem that. Some may defend Stone in the spirit of a line Randy Newman sang years ago: "He may be a fool, but he's our fool." Not mine he isn't. **B**

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