

Mythmaking vs. muckraking

*Does 'JFK' tell the truth?
Does it matter? We asked
two 'assassination buffs'*

By Kathleen Donnelly
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THE criticism started even before Oliver Stone had finished filming "JFK."
"Dances With Facts," said film writers, reporters and long-time conspiracy theorists/investigators critical of the story they expected from Stone's \$40 million, three-hour film about the assassination of John F. Kennedy. "It's A Wonderful Lie," some called it, "Dallas in Wonderland."

Critics charged Stone was not just calling into question the Warren Commission's report on the murder, which concluded that a derailed 24-year-old ex-Marine, Lee Harvey Oswald, had acted alone in killing the president as he rode in a motorcade through Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963.

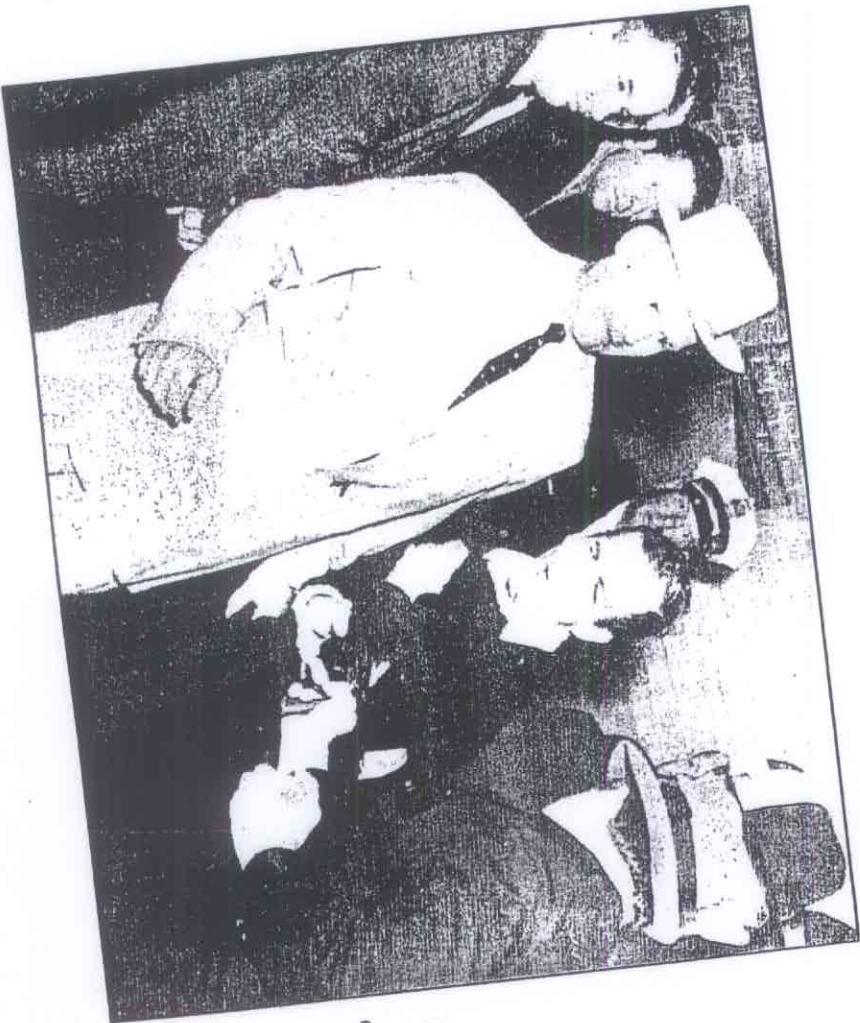
Many of them, after all, doubted the Warren Commission findings themselves. But Stone was messing with history.

The flash point for the critics' anger was Stone's main source for the film, former New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, played in the film as a noble seeker of truth by Kevin Costner.

Garrison is the only official ever to bring criminal charges in Kennedy's murder. In 1969, he prosecuted a retired New Orleans businessman named

Clay Shaw, who, Garrison contended, was part of a massive conspiracy to kill the president.

But one of Garrison's crucial witnesses, David Ferrie, died before the case came to trial. Shaw was acquitted and Garrison, once a hero to a cadre of amateur re-



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searchers tagged "assassination buffs," lost his credibility.

In meeting the criticism, Stone has pointed out that his movie is just that: a movie.

"Film makers make myths," he told Newsweek. "They take the true meanings of events and shape them. . . . I made Garrison better than he is for a larger purpose."

Now that the film is open, we took two assassination buffs to see it and asked for their opinions.

Josiah Thompson, 56, is a former Haverford College philosophy professor who is now a private detective in San Francisco. He is author of a book on the Kennedy assassination, "Six Seconds in Dallas," and was a consultant to Life magazine's investigation of the assassination when Garrison began his investigation.

Paul Hoch, 49, is a computer programmer and analyst at the University of California, Berkeley. For 13 years, he has published a newsletter for researchers, reporters and others interested in the Kennedy assassination called "Echoes of Conspiracy."

Many critics have said that Stone made a mistake in using Jim Garrison's theories, and Garrison himself, as a focus for the film. Did he?

PAUL HOCH: I think the rhetoric of the closing argument (in which the Garrison character makes his case for conspiracy) would have been more convincing coming from any critic other than Jim Garrison, because he did prosecute someone I believe was innocent. I agree with Sissy Spacek/Liz Garrison (Spacek plays Garrison's wife) that (Shaw's) homosexuality was an important reason why the case against him could proceed as far as it did. He may well have lied about knowing David Ferrie, but that's not the same as killing the president.

JOSIAH THOMPSON: The problem is: If you use Garrison's book as the basis for your screenplay, then the story's going to be the

story of Garrison — a story completely without merit to be told again; one of the obscure, rather unhappy footnotes of history. The problem is, in using that story, that overwhelmed the Kennedy assassination.

Stone has said he realizes Garrison is not without faults, but he chose to make him better than he was to focus the story on Kennedy, not Garrison. Was he successful?

JT: In cleaning up (Garrison), he made him into a one-dimensional figure, which is cardboard. Clay Shaw is a much more interesting figure in the film. . . . The most moving thing about (the film) for me was the accurate representations of the feelings of that time, the winter and spring of 1968, when any of us who were politically aware felt that something dreadful was happening to society.

Were there parts of the film that you felt were so untruthful that they were unfair?

PH: There was no sense of the wildness of Garrison's theorizing or speculation at the time. . . . It would have been a much more interesting film if Shaw had been presented as completely confident in his own innocence, not campy and sleazy. I found it objectionable that the only objections that were raised against Garrison came from Bill (a member of Garrison's staff who turns against his boss in the film after being contacted by the FBI) . . . and Liz Garrison, the only one to raise the persecution-of-homosexuals issue. She is, I think, pretty clearly presented as someone who, until the very end, just doesn't get it.

With all the questions that are still unanswered 28 years after the assassination, could anyone have made a "truthful" film about it?

JT: Stone could have made a terrific film. He just bought the wrong script. He should have made



Sissy Spacek and Kevin Costner as the Garrisons in 'JFK'

a film of "Libra" (a novel about the assassination by Don DeLillo). It would not serve the political agenda that Stone has in mind, but it wouldn't ill-serve it either. I think it's just an unfortunate circumstance that he stumbled into this basis for his film. . . . I hoped the Garrison thing would just be the armature on which the story was hung, but it's not. The Kennedy assassination gets boring! I could not believe it, but I got bored!

PH: But it would be very, very hard to make a book like ("Libra") into a movie.

Stone has countered some criticism by pointing out film makers really make myths — "take the true meaning of events and shape them." Does Stone have a responsibility to give a more balanced version of the assassination?

PH: (Stone's) been very strong about not having an obligation to Shaw because he was CIA, and he lied on the stand. The unfairness, I think, has to focus on Shaw and maybe even Ferrie. He was weird, but he can be weird without being any kind of conspirator.

JT: Part of the problem is the film medium is so powerful that it offers you, in 70mm surround-sound and everything else, What Happened. It doesn't offer you this fuzzy way it happened; it offers you in absolute clarity What Happened. . . . This movie throws in about every chestnut that's been around since 1965 (as though it

happened).

Some critics have worried that moviegoers, especially those born after 1963, will take the film's version of events as the absolute truth. Are you worried?

JT: This will become now, for the '90s, the remembrance of the Kennedy assassination for a whole segment of the population. And I don't think it's that bad. Most of these nuggets presented in the film — they're not off-the-wall, crazy, stupid. . . . When you compare the awesome fluff that Hollywood is pumping out there that's going to follow this film into the theaters, (you have to say) thank God for Oliver Stone, who at least tried something serious. I'm not talking about the truthfulness or validity of it; I'm talking about a film that says anything about anything. At least it's serious.

PH: But it's also potentially dangerous. I was thinking, what kind of job could (Stone) do for Oliver North or Richard Nixon or Howard Hunt — someone who's politically in a different spot?