

# Explosive Imagery of 'J.F.K.' Igniting Debate in Audiences

*lots editing*  
By MICHAEL SPECTER

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In Dallas, they never doubted the conspiracy. From Harvard Square and Berkeley to the frozen streets of Minneapolis there have always been the buffs, people with models of Dealey Plaza and leatherbound copies of the Warren Commission Report parked in their basements, certain that the full story of who killed President Kennedy has never been — and maybe never will be — told.

But for some members of a generation far more likely to connect the words "Single-Bullet Theory" to a mediocre rock band than to the distant death of a President, Oliver Stone's polemical new film "J.F.K." seems to have unleashed a surprising rage about that November day and all the investigations that followed.

"I guess that hippie guy was right,"

## The Kahane Verdict

An Egyptian immigrant was cleared of the murder of Rabbi Meir Kahane after the jury saw missing links in the evidence presented by the prosecution. "Even though there was a smoking gun, it was not positively identifiable," one alternate said.

Article, page B1.

said Sarah Borenstein, a 29-year-old lawyer from Hartford as she left the film on Saturday, the day after it opened. "Never trust anybody over 30. To me Kennedy was just a drinker and a fraud. I never even knew what he might have done, what they stopped. Why has this been ignored?"

## The Grand Theory

After hundreds of books, dozens of documentaries and thousands of pages of Congressional testimony, it would be hard to argue that what many people consider the defining event of mid-20th-century America has been ignored. But to many of the millions raised after Watergate, whose verities have largely been cinematic, the idea that Lee Harvey Oswald could have acted alone seems too shocking to accept.

Instead, many appear to have succumbed to Mr. Stone's Grand Unified Conspiracy Theory, a gaudy, frenetic fiction about a man who was prevented from delivering peace to the world by a bloodthirsty military-industrial complex that could not stand to yield power. The C.I.A., the F.B.I., Army intelligence, the Mafia, the Dallas police, Laos, Cambodia, Burma, Vietnam, Cuba — all the images linked neatly in a dark celluloid chain. Whatever the

Continued on Page A14, Column 2

*NY Times 12/23/91 p11 col 1-2*

# Audiences Debating Explosive 'J.F.K.'



Michael Tweed for The New York Times

"They were American royalty," said Richard A. Konigsberg after seeing Oliver Stone's new film, "J.F.K.," in Los Angeles.

Continued From Page A1

merits of "J.F.K." as a film, it seems to have clearly hit a mark with an audience too young to remember where it was on Nov. 22, 1963.

Mr. Stone hoped it would. A great believer in the political power of the cinema, he dedicated "J.F.K." to "the young in whose spirit the search for truth moves on." In discussions this weekend about the movie and the world view that underlies it, dozens who saw it throughout the country called it "courageous" and "disturbing." Many eagerly embraced the enduring myth that if only Kennedy had lived — and Camelot had been extended — we could have somehow avoided the worst horrors that followed for America.

## Reconsidering History

Mr. Stone presents the glorious mystique of the early 60's in rich colors. There is Jackie with the kids. And Jack at Hyannis. Camelot never looked better.

"My mother has pictures with her hair looking like Jackie," said Richard A. Konigsberg, a 25-year-old actor from Los Angeles. "They were American royalty. My mother still has the Life magazines of the wedding and the assassination."

And whether they regarded John F.

Kennedy as the last American nobleman, or an overrated icon from a faltering dynasty, many of those under 40 who sat through the three-hour film agreed that it portrayed a crucial moment in American history in a way few had considered.

"He was the only shining star that ever crossed the American political sky," said Joe Savino, 36, a Los Angeles screenwriter who was a Catholic school third grader in Queens the day Kennedy was shot. "I think his assassination robbed us of a political opportunity. I was taught that it was Lee Harvey Oswald that did it. Then a lot of people in my generation began to ask questions, first with the Vietnam war, then with Watergate.

"My own common sense tells me something was wrong," he continued, expressing a sentiment shared widely among those who saw the film. "And we know after Watergate and after the past 20 years that our Government lies."

Polls have long shown that few Americans — of any age — readily accept the idea that Oswald, acting alone, killed Kennedy. The film portrays the New Orleans District Attorney, Jim Garrison, whose bizarre investigation of the assassination has been widely discredited, as a modern-day Mr. Smith, battling against all odds for a truth that dare not be told.



Steve Hart for The New York Times

"I don't like Oliver Stone," said Kenneth Levine, a Columbia student, after seeing the film with Veticia Searcy in Manhattan. "I find that evoking patriotism so much feels very stale, very old," he added.

But the film's vocal critics say that even if a conspiracy existed, Mr. Stone's suggestion that the murder was a coup d'état conducted by generals and perhaps even by Vice President Lyndon Johnson, is ridiculous. They fault Mr. Stone most for his greatest achievement: cleverly bending the images of life on film until only those truly schooled in Kennedy assassination theory could properly parse the truth from the invention.

"I don't rule out a conspiracy but not on that level," said Michael Fleming, a 24-year-old graduate student at Harvard University who was disturbed by Mr. Stone's cinematic techniques, which weave often imperceptibly between fact, documentary, fiction and the large gray vistas in the middle.

Many who saw the movie, and acknowledged that they accepted some notion of a conspiracy, said they felt uncomfortable with the scope portrayed.

"How could something so vast and disabling be covered up so completely and for so long?" said Susan Kreuger,

a 29-year-old lawyer, as she emerged from a Manhattan theater. "I really think he captured the politics of the time. I feel certain we don't know the full story. But I just don't know how much of his story we can possibly believe."

#### 'He's Too Sugary'

Part of the problem the film creates for its younger audience is that by presenting fact and fiction as if they were one, it becomes impossible to tell the difference between the two. Takes from the Zapruder film of the assassination, which has probably become the most widely viewed home movie in history, cannot readily be distinguished from a dramatic portrayal of an autopsy scene that never occurred.

"I don't like Oliver Stone," said Kenneth Levine, a 21-year-old Columbia student. "He's too sugary. He makes things too black and white. Good and justice versus bad and evil. I find that evoking patriotism so much feels very stale, very old."

The film asserts that President Ken-

edy was "soft on Communism," that he would certainly have cut short America's escalating involvement in Vietnam, and it implies that he was killed — at least in part — for that.

In an important scene near the end of the film, President Johnson is shown signing a National Security Action Memorandum only a few days after Kennedy died. The film asserts that the directive "essentially reversed" Kennedy's unseen policy to withdraw troops from Vietnam, and suggests it provoked the Gulf of Tonkin incident and caused the war to accelerate.

But the memo Mr. Stone cites continued Kennedy's policies, and, historians have shown, was drafted the day before he journeyed to Dallas.

The visual sleight of hand caused more problems for older viewers than it did for those who were young. Many were prepared to accept conspiracies, but few were able to adopt the film as a route to understanding them.

Jack Scapparo, a 57-year-old New Yorker, considers himself an assassination buff and said he has long believed that more than one man acted to end Kennedy's life. Like most Americans his age, he can remember with precision the events of the day Kennedy died. He was preparing to take his driver's exam when he heard the news. He was so shaken, he failed.

"I think his death has had an effect on who I am," he said. "I guess the skepticism that was born in me the day Oswald was shot in the basement has colored every political thought I've had ever since. I felt Oswald was being killed for a reason other than that he was the lone assassin and that it did involve the complicity of the government in some sort of cover-up."