



This photograph showing the assassination of President Kennedy was taken after the first bullet hit.

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'JFK' film has students talking about history

But area educators are divided over use of the movie as a teaching tool. After all, one said, Oliver Stone is not a historian.

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It's a field trip, 1990s style.

Or is it?

It's a golden moment for history teachers trying to reach a generation born in the 1970s.

Or is it?

The hot debate about the credibility of the Oliver Stone movie JFK has trickled down from talk shows, newsmagazines and editorial pages into an unlikely arena: the everyday conversations of American high school and college students born at least a decade after John F. Kennedy's death in 1963.

"Everyone's talking about it. We just got out of basketball practice a few minutes ago and we were talking about it in the hall," said Chad Kremp, born in 1975, a junior at Jenkintown Senior High School.

So many students have gone to see the movie that teachers are now debating whether to use the film as a teaching tool, a way to bring history to life.

Some teachers are trying to catch the wave of interest by interrupting their regular lesson plans and turning their attention to the 1960s, the Vietnam War and the possibility of a conspiracy to kill the nation's youngest elected president.

"Why teach about Attila the Hun just because it's on your schedule, when this movie is around?" said Dan Chittick, honors history teacher at Jenkintown High.

But other teachers say it's just a movie. "We won't use the film here because Oliver Stone is not, after all, a historian," said Fred Norton, chairman of the social studies department for the Oxford Area School District in Chester County. "We use education in Chester County." (See "JFK" on D3)



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Beaver College students (from left) Michelle Borkowski, Lisa McClain, Yvonne Walker and (rear) Lisa Svitak at a lecture incorporating "JFK."

"JFK," from District films provided by the school district," said Norton, who has taught for 31 years.

While many teachers share Norton's qualms about Stone's credentials as a historian, a good number believe that the film is an ideal way to generate interest in an era that students consider ancient history.

Asked to think back to the first historical moment they could remember, high school and college students interviewed this week listed events such as Jimmy Carter's election as president, the release of the Iranian hostages and the explosion of the Challenger — nothing dating earlier than 1976.

The movie takes students on a field trip of sorts into the past, teachers said. And many teachers believe that it is their responsibility to guide impressionable minds through the maze of fact and fiction in Stone's film.

"It's a very powerful film, and it's one of the things an educator can take advantage of. Some people are very adept at this, using contemporary material in the classroom," said Evelyn Bender, a member of the

Philadelphia Alliance for Teaching Humanities, who last summer helped lead a seminar on using film as a resource.

"Teachers can help students decide how to study it themselves," said George Reim, chairman of the social studies department at Cheltenham Senior High School. "If they are 16 or 17, they are impressionable and they come out of the theater thinking this is truth; we need to teach them that they need to look at the different theories."

James M. Larkin, director of teacher education at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education, said Stone's biases should not be the issue.

"It doesn't matter if he is right or wrong; what you want to do is get some learning out of it," said Larkin.

Stone has dedicated the movie to the nation's young people, urging them to study the issue on their own and question the answers that adults have given them.

Many teachers say their students are taking up Stone's challenge.

"The other day I saw a girl in the hall carrying around an abridged version of the Warren Commission

report," said Reim at Cheltenham High. "I haven't seen that since 1968."

Chittick, at Jenkintown High, said that each year he asked students to do a semester paper on any topic in 20th-century history. This year, for the first time, a majority of his class (five out of nine students) asked to write about the Kennedy assassination.

"The conspiracy theory is a perfect topic for an adolescent. They love things like that," said Chittick. "I'm very cynical about the movie, but I'm glad it's out there."

He said he rearranged his schedule of lectures to fit in a discussion of the Kennedy years.

But John Preg, chairman of the social studies department for the Wallingford-Swarthmore School District, said that for teachers to spend a couple of hours, or even a couple of days, on the Kennedy issue could be irresponsible.

"If you were to do it right, it would require a lot of research, and then you're talking about a fairly large time commitment," he said. "It's not something you can just discuss off the top of your head."

Larkin, the Penn professor, said school districts often required teachers to cover a certain number of topics during a semester, leaving them little time to detour onto unmapped territory.

At Beaver College in Glenside, Professor Bob Thompson has woven the film into his lectures about U.S. history and the Cold War.

"The film is both a problem and an opportunity," said Thompson, who admits to being a big Stone fan. "The problem is that Stone gets wrapped up in his theory, but the opportunity is the chance to look at different theories of why the assassination happened. And, to me, the opportunity outweighs the problem."

In a lecture Wednesday about the nation's Cold War philosophy, Thompson referred to one of the first scenes in the movie — a clip of Dwight D. Eisenhower's farewell address warning the nation about the power of the military-industrial complex.

Thompson mentioned that, in the movie, Stone implies that military

and business interests were behind Kennedy's assassination.

The class of 13 students, mostly 19 to 22 years old, exploded into debate about Kennedy's Cold War tendencies, the might of the military-industrial complex and Stone's selective presentation of facts.

Thompson loved it.

And then it came, the moment when Thompson knew that he had accomplished his mission.

"Look, whether the movie is right or not, Oliver Stone is trying to get young people excited about politics," said Lisa Svitak, beginning a speech that Stone probably would wish he'd written himself.

"We are the Reagan babies, who sat in front of the TV, nodding at everything the government said," Svitak said with passion. "Oliver Stone wants to say, 'Don't sit in front of the TV anymore; question authority.'"

Classmate David Clemens, 20, picked up the sentiment.

"When he dedicated the movie to our generation, he was saying to us that we have to start looking at things with a critical eye."

Bingo.

"That's what I want to show," said Thompson in an interview away from the class. "Even if Oliver Stone's mind is closed, he has made a movie that has opened minds."