

JFK

THE MYSTERY
BECOMES
THE MOVIE

Theories of conspiracy abound

From staff reports

Questions have swirled around the assassination of President John F. Kennedy for 25 years, and many conspiracy theorists now believe that the truth about the "crime of the century" may be locked away forever.

Was the assassination of the president the act of a lone assassin or the work of conspirators? Was the Soviet Union or the Cuban government involved? Did members of organized crime play a role?

The lead character in Oliver Stone's film *JFK* is New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, who prosecuted the only Kennedy assassination case ever carried to criminal trial. Mr. Garrison attempted to prove that right-wing CIA operatives and anti-Castro Cubans killed the president. But his theory is only one of more than a dozen incorporated in the film.

The U.S. Justice Department officially ended its inquiry into the assassination in September 1988, stating that "no persuasive evidence can be identified to support the theory of a conspiracy." The Justice Department's investigation had come at the behest of the U.S. House Select Committee on Assassinations, which concluded in 1978 that President Kennedy "probably" was assassinated as a result of a conspiracy involving a second gunman.

The first inquiry into the assassination — conducted by the Warren Commission — began only days after the president's death. The commission, after hearing testimony from 532 witnesses and reviewing thousands of pages of documents, concluded in 1964 that Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, fired three

shots from a sixth-floor window of the Texas School Book Depository.

At first, most of the public embraced the Warren report as the definitive, accurate account of the assassination. By 1966, however, criticism of the report was growing, and various assassination theories emerged.

One of the most damaging critiques of the Warren report was contained in the 1966 book *Inquest: The Warren Commission and the Establishment of Truth* by Edward Jay Epstein.

Mr. Epstein's book concluded that the commission sought a version of the assassination that was "politically expedient" rather than the truth. It was expedient, he said, for the commission to absolve the Soviets and the Cubans of blame to avert a war.

Mr. Epstein was the first Warren Commission critic to publish an FBI report of the assassination that was inconsistent with the Navy's autopsy report on President Kennedy. The autopsy report stated that the bullet that hit President Kennedy in the upper back exited at the front of his neck. But the FBI report obtained by Mr. Epstein, dated Jan. 13, 1964, stated: "Medical examination of the president's body had revealed that the bullet which entered his back had penetrated to a distance of less than a finger length."

If the FBI report was accurate, the bullet that hit President Kennedy in the back could not have hit Texas Gov. John Connally, and one of the primary findings of the Warren report would be wrong.

Based on film footage of the assassination, Mr. Epstein also questioned whether Mr. Oswald could have fired his

bolt-action weapon fast enough to wound President Kennedy and Gov. Connally. For the Warren report to stand, one bullet had to have exited President Kennedy's neck and then caused Gov. Connally's wounds.

The FBI report and the film contributed to early theories that a second assassin fired from in front of the president's limousine.

Mark Lane, a New York lawyer who wrote *Rush to Judgment* in 1966, argued that the president's head wounds possibly had been caused by a bullet fired from in front of the motorcade and not "behind and somewhat above" the vehicle as the Warren report had stated.

The publication of their books was followed by a torrent of assassination theories. The four main theories were:

- President Kennedy was killed as a result of an international communist plot directed by either the Kremlin or the Cuban government.

- Cuban exiles living in the United States hired Mr. Oswald to kill President Kennedy because the president had not crushed the Castro regime.

- Organized crime was behind the assassination. The Kennedy administration had launched a fierce attack on the Mafia to try to break its grip on the Teamsters union and American life in general.

- American intelligence agencies — most likely the CIA — had the president assassinated because he was a liberal and was taking a soft line on communism.

Other theories abounded, and what they lacked in plausibility they made up for in creativity. A man carrying an umbrella, one theory says, fired small rock-

ets at the president.

The most reputable group to establish a conspiracy theory was the House Select Committee on Assassinations. In its final report, dated March 29, 1979, the summary states: "President John F. Kennedy was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy."

At the heart of the theory was the committee's finding that four shots, not three, were fired at the presidential motorcade, though the National Academy of Sciences later disputed the House committee's research.

The conspiracy theories took a bizarre turn seven years ago when Michael H.B. Eddowes, a 79-year-old British restaurateur, suggested there had been a Soviet plot to kill President Kennedy. He believed an impostor was buried in the Oswald grave, but medical tests confirmed that the body was Mr. Oswald's.

One of the more recent assassination conspiracy theories was outlined in the 1985 book *Reasonable Doubt* by Henry Hurt of Chatham, Va. He put a different spin on the old theory that Cuban exiles, angered by the Bay of Pigs fiasco, ordered the assassination.

Mr. Hurt's contention is based on interviews with ex-convict and mental patient Robert Easterling of Mississippi who claimed to have been involved in the plot. Mr. Easterling says that a Cuban with the pseudonym Manuel Rivera was the real assassin and that Mr. Oswald was framed.

This is an excerpt from a story by staff writer Bill Deener, with contribution from staff writer William J. Choyke. The article, written for *The Dallas Morning News*'s 1983 special report on the Kennedy assassination, was updated in 1988.