



The 'JFK' furor

**Stone defends his
vision of that dark
day in Dallas**

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Director Oliver Stone, right, with Kevin Costner, reconstructed for the cameras the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

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It will be the best of times in a tale of Studio City

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COVER STORY

Deadly hawks

Stone's 'JFK' hints at military link to case

By Tom Jacobs
Daily News Staff Writer

As a Vietnam veteran, Oliver Stone knows something about being under fire. But even his experience in jungle warfare couldn't have prepared him for the unrelenting assault that has been waged against "JFK," his new film that speculates about a conspiracy to assassinate President Kennedy.

Even while filming was under way in Dallas, major news outlets — including Time magazine, whose sister company, Warner Bros., is distributing the film — attacked its premise as absurd, and its director as irresponsible. A conspiracy to kill the president by members of the military-industrial complex, who were upset by his plans to pull out of Vietnam? "Far-fetched" was probably the nicest adjective applied to the scenario on the nation's editorial pages.

This past Sunday, a few hours before Stone faced the press, a major volley was lobbed from the Arts and Leisure section of The New York Times. Tom Wicker, who covered the assassination for the newspaper, wrote a scathing critique, complaining about its "wild assertions" and claiming Stone was "rewriting history."

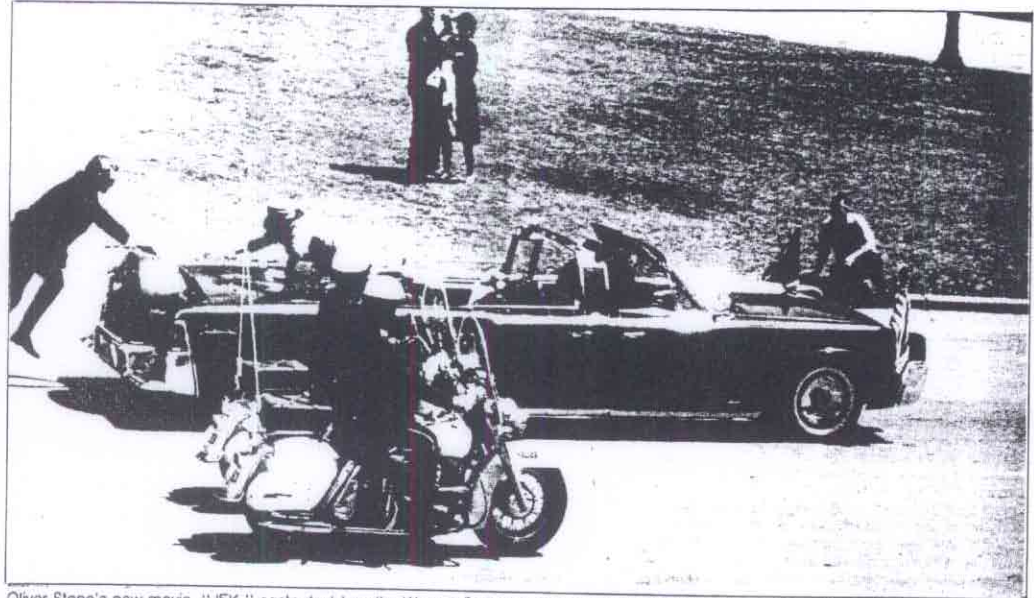
Stone was ready with his rebuttal. "I think the press blew it (on the Kennedy assassination), and I think a lot of these people are angry that a filmmaker, an artist, tried to do some of the work they didn't do," the director proclaimed. "I think there's a territorial issue here."

"Wicker, to me, is a part of the official priesthood of people in the media who have been attacking the movie. They are older, white males who have a stake in continuing the official story."

The official story, of course, is the Warren Commission report, which concluded that Lee Harvey Oswald was the sole assassin of Kennedy. It stated that the disturbed loner (and apparent communist) had fired three shots from a book depository building as the president and his wife rode by in a motorcade. One of the shots hit Kennedy in the head.

In the years since that report was issued, numerous scholars and investigators have questioned its conclusions. The most aggressive challenge came from New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, who filed charges in 1969 against Clay Shaw, a Louisiana businessman he alleged was a part of the conspiracy to kill the president.

Shaw was acquitted, but Garri-



Oliver Stone's new movie, "JFK," casts doubt on the Warren Commission's conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone gunman.

son (who now is a judge) continues to believe there was a conspiracy. After reading his book a few years ago, Stone came to the same conclusion, and he decided it would make a strong subject for a film.

The final product is a three-hour examination of all the conspiracy theories Stone found credible (including Garrison's). He effectively rips apart the Warren Commission's conclusions and suggests that higher-ups in the military and intelligence community, fearing Kennedy had gone "soft on communism," had the motive and means to carry out an assassination.

"What is so scary about my film?" Stone asked (the tone was more of a challenge than a question). "It asks some questions. Even if (the scenario depicted is) distorted, and I'm crazy, there are some facts in there that are pretty startling."

In his New York Times piece, Wicker presents two specific charges against the movie. Stone portrays an NBC documentary about Garrison, broadcast before Shaw's trial, as a hatchet job. Wicker says it conclusively shows that Garrison intimidated witnesses and couldn't back up his accusations.

"That documentary was so one-sided that Garrison went to the FCC and successfully got rebuttal time," Stone noted, adding that NBC "was owned at that time by

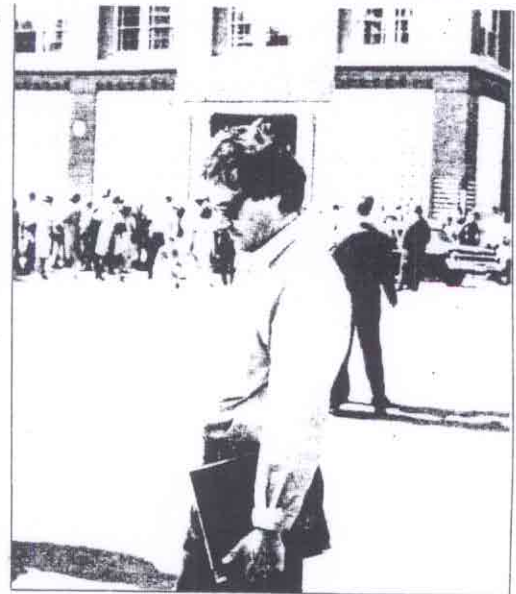
RCA, which was run by David Sarnoff — who was to the right of Atilla the Hun, and was a real Cold Warrior. Sarnoff was also a major defense contractor."

Wicker's more serious charge is that Stone distorts Kennedy's stance toward Vietnam, which is a key to the entire conspiracy theory. Stone broadcasts part of a November 1963 interview with Kennedy conducted by Walter Cronkite, in which the president sounded quite dovish. Wicker notes he does not show us a Kennedy interview with David Brinkley from a week later in which the president strikes a considerably more hawkish and uncompromising tone.

"No question about it," Stone responded. "Kennedy was making official announcements that were pro-war. He took a Cold Warrior stance. He had to in order to be re-elected in '64."

Stone's theory rests on the assumption that Kennedy's public stance during his final months in office differed from his private convictions. The president's true convictions, he said, are shown by his late 1963 order to withdraw 1,000 American advisers from Vietnam — an action that was not made public for fear of protests from enraged hard-liners.

"Kennedy told (dovish senators) Mike Mansfield and Wayne Morse that he was going to take (the remaining) troops out in '65," Stone said. "Maybe he was lying



Director Oliver Stone in Dallas for the making of "JFK."

to them, but (the possibility of leaving Vietnam) certainly was on his mind.

"He called Morse to his office on Nov. 12, 10 days before he was

going to die, and said: 'Wayne, I'm going to surprise you, I'm coming around to your opinion on Viet-

See 'JFK' / Pg. 16

'JFK' intriguing, provocative film

By Tom Jacobs
Daily News Film Critic

Whatever one thinks of its central thesis, "JFK" is an extraordinary piece of filmmaking.

One can argue for hours about whether Oliver Stone's dramatization of a theoretical conspiracy to kill President

REVIEW Kennedy is heroic or irresponsible, genuinely gutsy or simply sensational. But the film does work, keeping audiences riveted for three full hours and leaving them shaken at the end.

The movie is all exposition; a good three-quarters of it consists of various characters describing what might have, or could have, happened in the months leading up to John Kennedy's assassination Nov. 22, 1963. But thanks to the highly charged nature of the subject matter, and Stone's use of various cinematic techniques, even the longest speeches never bore.

Importantly, the film begins with an excerpt from President Eisenhower's famous farewell address, in which he warns about the growing power of the military-industrial complex. It then moves into a brief summary of the Kennedy presidency, in which it states that JFK was contemplating withdrawing American forces from Vietnam.

This historical montage concludes on the day of the assassination, when Stone gives us images of Americans staring at their television sets in numb disbelief. Among them is Jim Garrison (Kevin Costner), the district attorney of New Orleans, who remarks quietly that he is ashamed to be an American that day.

When a local link to accused assassin Lee Harvey Oswald is reported on the news, Garrison conducts a brief investigation before turning to other matters. Like the rest of the nation, he accepts the official explanation that Oswald is the lone gunman. It isn't until three years later, after a U.S. Sena-

tor discloses his doubts about the Warren Commission's conclusions concerning the assassination, that he begins having second thoughts himself and reopens his investigation.

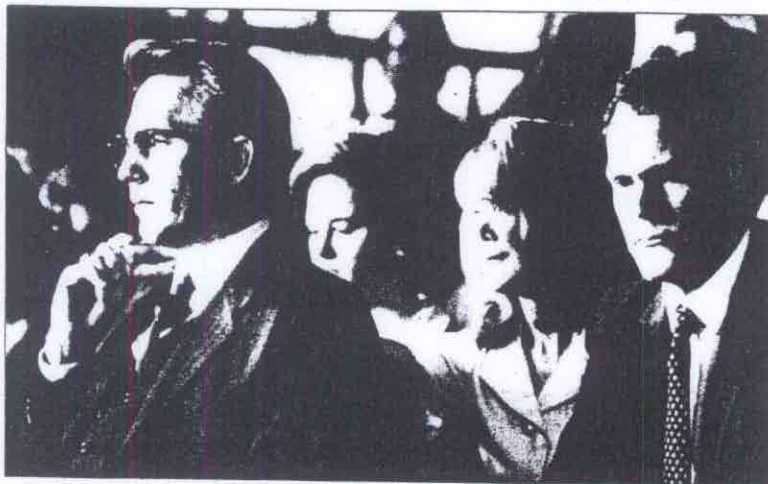
As Garrison and his aides interview a series of unsavory people, they begin piecing together an alternative explanation of the assassination, one that involves a conspiracy between anti-Castro fanatics and members of the U.S. military establishment. As he continues to investigate, we learn who might have had the motive and means to kill Kennedy and (in painstaking detail) why the official explanation of a single crazed gunman simply does not hold up.

Throughout all this, Stone skillfully moves back and forth in time, mixing actual footage taken the day of the assassination with newly shot film doctored to look as if it was shot the same day. His use of flashbacks is incredibly skillful and always to the point; with a few notable exceptions, the movie does not have a wasted moment.

One cringed a bit earlier this year upon learning Stone was actually shooting scenes in the book depository building from which the fatal shots allegedly were fired; the action smacked of exploitation. But the film justifies this decision.

By taking us inside the building, Stone shows us that Oswald would have had a much better shot at the president through a different window. Why did he wait until the motorcade had advanced to what was, for him, a more difficult angle? It's interesting to read such information in a book, but actually seeing the view from the second-story window leaves a far deeper impression.

Much of the criticism of the film arises from the assumption that audiences will simply swallow Stone's thesis whole, and consider the mystery now solved. Granted, this is a danger — through its manipulation of emotions, film can be an awfully persuasive medium.



New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison (Kevin Costner), his wife, Liz (Sissy Spacek) and investigator Lou Ivon (Jay O. Sanders), in a courtroom scene from "JFK."



Lee Harvey Oswald (Gary Oldman) answers questions at a news conference after his arrest in Oliver Stone's "JFK."

But doesn't it smack of the same sort of paternalism that many of us felt permeated the Warren Commission report? Isn't there something offensive about the notion that the public isn't bright enough to weigh different theories and make up its own mind?

Besides, while the Garrison character in the film lays down possible theories and motives, and voices his strong suspicions, he never states flatly, "This is what happened." Rather, he tears apart

the official version of what happens and asks us whether another isn't more plausible.

Costner redeems himself after his inadequate performance as "Robin Hood;" he brings exactly the right earnestness and low-key heroism to Garrison (who, from all accounts, was not nearly as angelic in real life). The extremely strong supporting cast, including Tommy Lee Jones, Ed Asner, Joe Pesci and Laurie Metcalf, gives him superb support.

boat."

The actor added that the idea of high-level corruption really isn't so shocking when you think about it. "It is human nature that when people get into powerful positions, their motives don't necessarily parallel that of the public need," he said.

Another criticism of the film is that it turns Garrison, a man whose integrity has been questioned, into a Capraesque hero. (Costner's performance has been compared with Jimmy Stewart's in "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington.")

Costner and Stone respond that they never set out to present an accurate portrait of the man. Rather, their Garrison is more a symbolic figure — a man in search of the truth.

"If it were a biography, we'd have to get all the shadings of the man, all the nuances," Costner said. "His history would have to be exposed more than it is. He's the centerpiece of the movie because that's how (Stone) is hanging the story, but it's not a biography."

If people get angry watching the film and feel compelled to do something, Stone hopes they will write their senators and representatives and urge them to make public the official files on the assassination, which are scheduled to remain sealed until 2029.

"With one vote (by Congress) they could open it tomorrow," Stone said. "Even more important, why don't the CIA, FBI and military intelligence open their files on Oswald? The Russians, the

THE FACTS

- **The film:** "JFK" (R).
- **The stars:** Kevin Costner, Tommy Lee Jones, Gary Oldman, Laurie Metcalf, Michael Rooker and Sissy Spacek.
- **Behind the scenes:** Directed by Oliver Stone. Screenplay by Stone and Zachary Sklar, based on the books "On the Trail of the Assassins" by Jim Garrison and "Crossfire: The Plot That Killed Kennedy" by Jim Marrs. Produced by A. Kitman Ho and Stone. Distributed by Warner Bros.
- **Running time:** Three hours, nine minutes.
- **Playing:** Citywide.
- **Our rating:** ★★★★★
★★★★ — don't miss it; ★★★ — worth your while; ** — has its moments; * — if you must; ○ — don't bother.

"JFK" falls flat only during the sequences showing Garrison at home, arguing with his wife and neglecting his kids. These seem perfunctory and trite, in spite of Sissy Spacek's intelligent performance as his wife.

Otherwise, Stone's latest effort is provocative in the best sense; it raises the sort of disturbing questions we'd rather not face. No wonder it has made so many people so angry.

East Germans and the Romanians have been able to see (the files of their secret police). Are they more progressive than we are?"

Such comments aside, Stone remains mostly on the defensive as his film opens nationwide, deflecting charges that the work portrays a highly speculative (and, to some minds, discredited) theory as the one and only truth.

"(The film) is a combination of fact and speculation," he said. "I think I've been very open about that. (Garrison) says in his summation, 'Let's speculate, shall we?'"

"I have created, I hope, a counter-myth to the Warren Commission. By myth, I mean a combination of hypothesis and fact. A myth cannot be proved. I have no smoking gun."

'JFK'

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nam. It's a lost cause. The American public would not support the invasion of Cuba, and they're not going to support sending combat troops to Vietnam."

Whatever Kennedy's genuine feelings on the subject, there's no question that "the perception of him in the corridors of power" was that he was going dangerously soft, according to the film's co-screenwriter, Zachary Sklar.

"It's pretty clear that he was perceived as changing traditional Cold War policy, not just on Vietnam," Sklar said. "He had signed a nuclear-test-ban treaty with the Soviets over the objections of the

Joint Chiefs of Staff.

"He had opened a back-door channel with Fidel Castro and was trying to negotiate to re-establish diplomatic relations. These kinds of things were known, and they were not appreciated in those circles."

It's an argument Costner finds persuasive. (The actor was planning to take some months off after "Robin Hood," at the request of his wife. But she read the "JFK" script and thought it was an important project he should participate in.)

"Like most Americans, I can almost believe anything anymore," Costner said. "I think this government was operating for a long time in a rogue way. I think Kennedy did not seem like a team player (to these people). He rocked the