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If truth's the objective, both 'JFK' and Warren are flawed

By WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

In his movie, "JFK," Oliver Stone rekindles the debate over an event that changed our history as well as our lives. The 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy remains an emotionally charged mystery for millions of Americans because it marked the end of an era of innocence.

Together with journalists' criticism that "JFK" is lacking in accuracy, the emotional impact makes for one of the most controversial films in recent history. What is at the heart of the controversy is the degree to which the movie "JFK" and the Warren Commission report it so categorically rejects represent a genuine search for truth. The issue is historical responsibility.

ONE OF the first things an aspiring historian learns when he enters graduate school is that, above all, he must strive for integrity and balance in his work. Integrity is based on a rigid adherence to the facts as well as an ethical commitment to the essential truth of the position taken. Balance allows the historian to

acknowledge contrary evidence without having to compromise his judgments. Integrity and balance are not only fundamental to historical inquiry but to the search for truth itself. Oliver Stone's film is sorely lacking in both.

"JFK" treats matters that are wholly speculative as fact while failing to acknowledge alternative explanations. The movie is based on a single, coherent pattern of conspiracy that spreads from the Mafia and anti-Castro exiles to the upper reaches of the CIA, the FBI and the Dallas Police Department. The operating assumption is that Kennedy was planning to pull out of Vietnam, once re-elected, and would then work towards detente with America's communist rivals. This went against the aims of the military-industrial complex, which wanted to continue the Vietnam War and intensify the larger Cold War. Killing Kennedy and replacing him with Lyndon Johnson, whose thinking was more in line with the military establishment, would achieve these goals.

Kennedy's alleged "soft-on-communism" approach doesn't square with his

rhetoric, however, which assigned for America the role of "watchman on the walls of freedom" or his Cold Warrior tactics in Berlin or Cuba. The inconsistency casts doubt on the basic premise of the movie, raising serious questions about the conspiracy theory itself.

THE ISSUE of integrity is more ambiguous. Stone is ideologically committed to the conspiracy theory as reflected by his powerful screenplay. But integrity is also compromised in "JFK," most glaringly in the character of Jim Garrison, the New Orleans district attorney who investigated the events of Nov. 22, 1963. Despite Kevin Costner's convincing portrayal of Garrison as an All-American hero and seeker after truth, there is no escaping the reality that in the late 1960s Garrison refused to stand by his initial theories and that he, along with his aides, threatened and bribed witnesses, who then lied in court.

Yet Stone believes such deception to be justified. "I made Garrison better than he is for a larger purpose," stated the filmmaker in a December 23 *Newsweek* interview. And just what was that larger pur-

pose? "To make people want to strip away the lies and covert operations" that have surrounded the Kennedy assassination for 28 years. Stone has a point.

Although a film like "JFK" inevitably distorts history because it must compress events and images into a short span in order to give clarity to some complex circumstances, it does have some real value. If nothing else, "JFK" compels its viewers to discern fact from conjecture and to question rather than to accept blindly the assertions and policies of our government officials, most of all the Warren Commission.

Just 10 months after the assassination, the Warren Commission released an 888-page report concluding that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in killing John F. Kennedy. It was a quick and uncomplicated verdict. A decade later, in 1974, the commission published 26 volumes of testimony, evidence and exhibits that formed the foundation for its findings. While these volumes were meant to confirm the initial report, they only served to weaken it. By 1979 even the House Select Committee on Assassinations could not

deny that more than one existed.

THE WARREN Commission itself to be rushed into print without a document that could not be defined as very nature, especially pressure of immediate political. By rushing to judgment, appearance that it had conducted enough investigation, and by not candidly just how it conducted investigation, the Warren Commission failed in its historical responsibility. It not been for the Zapruder efforts of independent researchers the Freedom of Information Act, the nation would know far less about the assassination does today.

"JFK" may not be the most accurate movie but it certainly registers that the Warren Commission was a casualty in the assassination of Kennedy long before Oliver Stone.

The writer has a master's degree from Brown University and is pursuing a doctorate in that field at the University of Pennsylvania.

OPINION

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deny that more than one gunman existed.

THE WARREN Commission allowed itself to be rushed into print with a statement that could not be definitive by its very nature, especially under the pressure of immediate political events. By rushing to judgment, giving the appearance that it had conducted a thorough investigation, and by not explaining candidly just how it conducted that investigation, the Warren Commission failed in its historical responsibility. Had it not been for the Zapruder film, the efforts of independent researchers and the Freedom of Information Act, the nation would know far less of the full truth about the assassination than it does today.

"JFK" may not be the most accurate movie but it certainly registers the point that the Warren Commission made truth a casualty in the assassination of John F. Kennedy long before Oliver Stone did.

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