

Bernard von Bothmer

Oliver Stone's *JFK*: Political Assassination, Kennedy, and Vietnam



Oliver Stone has had an enormous influence on the way the public has thought about American history and politics. Highly controversial, his movies have been the subject of much heated debate. None have sparked more controversy than his 1991 film *JFK*.

Though this essay will be a critical account of Stone's film, I would like to mention right away that I do believe that the film was a success, for two main reasons. One, I think that Stone is completely justified in challenging the Warren Commission. Many of the film's critics, in my judgment, overly personalized their commentary, and much of their anger was as much a reaction to Stone's cinematic style as it was to his basic argument. Stone has been quite eloquent in defending his view that "history" has always been contested terrain, and I believe that he should be allowed to use an unorthodox filmmaking approach to argue his case. Dismissing Stone's film for merely even challenging the accuracy of the Warren Commission says more about Stone's enemies than it does about his movie.

Second, it is clear that Stone was quite successful in achieving the film's original goal, namely to provoke the American public. The film brought renewed interest in the events of the 1960s, and propelled numerous books on the assassination onto the *New York Times*' best-seller list. As Stone has said, "Movies, if they are any good, raise questions and inspire students to find out more."¹ And that is exactly what the film did. Because of Stone's film, a movement soon began to declassify thousands of documents relating to the assassination.

But despite these two areas of success, an important question remains: how valid is Stone's thesis regarding how the president's violent death influenced the progression of the Vietnam War? Despite my admiration for many parts of the film, I believe that critics were quite justified in attacking Stone for his argument that Kennedy would have withdrawn from Vietnam had he lived.

Violence, in particular political assassination, has not only shaped American history, but has also helped shape a specific memory of it as well. Stone's film demonstrates that the tragedy surrounding the late president's death has in part contributed to an overly romantic view of Kennedy, as the notion that violence shut down the great promise of Kennedy is an essential aspect of Stone's argument.

Stone's idealized version of what would have happened had Kennedy lived also demonstrates that Stone is far from the radical that his critics make him out to be. Rather, his film actually reinforces perceptions that many Americans have of Kennedy. Stone's efforts to portray Kennedy as a noble prince challenging the forces of evil do not contradict public opinion.

Stone's view of Kennedy has in large part been shaped by the tragedy of Kennedy's death. The film's greatest weakness is not so much his portrayal of a conspiracy to kill the president, as most of the commentary has been concerned with, but rather his portrayal of Kennedy as a revolutionary leader who challenged the status quo, especially with regard to the Cold War in Asia. The film shows that the violence of political assassination has the power to create very powerful historical myths.

Before I specifically speak about Stone's movie, it must be pointed out that analyzing the film can be quite challenging. First of all, the material is overwhelming. There are over 600 books written on the assassination alone,² and there is also the tremendous complexity of the Warren Commission report, which contains nearly one million pages of evidence, testimony, and exhibits,³ is nearly 1,000 pages long, and has over 17,000 pages in 25 volumes of supporting documentation.

A second challenge is separating the man from his work. Stone loves to be interviewed, and perhaps no single director has been as extensively interviewed as he has. As a consequence, Stone and his films often become intertwined. It is important to separate one's views of Stone the man from his films.

A third problem stems from the notoriously eccentric behavior of those who do not believe the Warren Commission. Anonymous faxes were sent to Stone during the filming of *JFK* claiming that a CIA agent was attempting to sabotage the film, and Stone's office was flooded with assassination theories. One source claimed to own the "correct rifle" that Oswald used, another offered to show Stone a letter written by a U.S. president (which he never revealed) to the "real killer."⁴ In San Diego, television viewers angrily called a local station and accused it of harboring a CIA plot when a faulty transmitter disrupted cable service of a film on the alleged conspiracy behind the assassination.⁵ Tales such as these often make it hard to treat Stone seriously.

A final and related problem is the fact that Stone's name has become a frequent joke punch line, symbolizing an obsessive belief in the premise that evil, conniving,

and sinister forces lurk all around us. In one of the more celebrated and creative parodies of Stone, *Saturday Night Live* had a skit in which Stone played over and over again, just like the Zapruder film, the video of President George H. W. Bush vomiting during dinner with the Japanese Prime Minister in 1992, along with commentary, looking for “clues” to support a “conspiracy,” much as Jim Garrison did in the final courtroom scene of *JFK*.⁶ Because Stone has often been the subject of such parody, many resist taking him seriously.

But the film elicited a most serious reaction from its many critics, much of which was published even before the film was released. As early as May 1991, a full eight months before the film’s opening, several major newspapers attacked the movie. According to Stone, reviewers had access to a stolen draft of the film, and thus what these reviewers read was not the final copy, but only the first of five or six drafts.

What was most unusual about the hostility towards the film was how personal it was. “Stone’s cinematic crusade often borders on the zany,” wrote Stanley Karnow, one of the nation’s leading historians of the Vietnam War. Other historians also echoed Karnow’s sentiments.⁷ Thomas Reeves called the film “a skillful piece of leftist propaganda... Underlying the complex and fantastic tale of conspiracy in high places is an intense hatred of the United States.”⁸ William Phillips wrote that “As historical docudrama... the film is a disaster.”⁹ And Jack Valenti, the head of the Motion Picture Association of America and a former Johnson Administration official, compared the film to *Triumph of the Will*, the Nazi propaganda film,¹⁰ describing it as a “hoax,” a “monstrous charade,” and a “smear.”¹¹

Former Johnson aid Joseph Califano, Jr., called the film “a disgraceful concoction of lies and distortions.”¹² George Will, in an essay entitled “Paranoid History,” labeled Stone an “intellectual sociopath,” and wrote that the film “is an act of (detestable) history and contemptible citizenship by a man of technical skill, scant education and negligible conscience.”¹³ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. called the film “reckless, paranoid, really despicable fantasy.”¹⁴ *Newsweek*’s cover read “The Twisted Truth of ‘JFK’: Why Oliver Stone’s New Movie Can’t Be Trusted.”¹⁵

Many accused Stone of McCarthyism. Nicholas Lemann wrote that “Garrison does have a forbear, but it isn’t Orwell or Kafka. It’s Joe McCarthy.”¹⁶ To David Belin, the film “crosses the threshold of slander and character assassination—a 1990’s version of McCarthyism.”¹⁷ And Schlesinger wrote that the thesis of the film was “reminiscent of the wilder accusations of Joe McCarthy.”¹⁸

Not all of the commentary was negative, though. Roger Ebert wrote that “never in my years as a newspaperman have I seen a subject pummeled so mercilessly and joylessly as this movie.”¹⁹ Robert Brent Toplin, the dean of American film historians, called it “one of the most significant political movies of the twentieth

century,”²⁰ and Michael Kurtz went so far as to argue, in what must be the greatest exaggeration ever written about a film, that “With the exception of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin JFK* probably had a greater direct impact on public opinion than any other work of art in American history.”²¹

But even though Norman Mailer suggested that “no film could ever be made of the Kennedy assassination that would be accurate, (as) there are too many theories and too much contradictory evidence,”²² and though Alan Dershowitz claimed that “Until history comes forward with facts, art is entitled to paint with a broad brush,”²³ Stone’s critics most definitely controlled the public debate.

How valid, then, were their complaints? Above all, Stone’s film is concerned with the question of how Kennedy would have handled Vietnam had he lived. It is in this area, rather than the other themes touched on by the film, that Stone is most vulnerable to the charge of gross historical distortion.

Vietnam has been the central preoccupation of Stone’s entire career. At times, Stone cannot seem to help from using Vietnam related terminology. It’s almost like a reflex response for him. For example, in describing the enormous effort that he made to promote the film, Stone has said “It’s like a war, in a sense, and I feel like we are the VC.”²⁴

What would Kennedy have done in Vietnam had he lived? The week before the film’s opening, McGeorge Bundy observed: “I don’t think we know what he would have done had he lived. I don’t know, and I don’t know anyone who does know.”²⁵

But Stone’s film claims to know, and in the process, creates a particular image of the late president. Stone’s defense of Kennedy is one of the single most consistent elements of his great many public pronouncements concerning the film, as he has said that Kennedy “was like a godfather to my generation. He was a very important figure, a leader, and a prince, in a sense.”²⁶ Stone has even been so bold to declare that “Kennedy is the last honorable president we have ever had.”²⁷

In an interview soon after the film’s release, Stone said that:

We remain haunted by Kennedy’s ghost and his unfulfilled dreams. Inevitably, J.F.K.’s death will come to be understood as the beginning of a terrible time for the United States, and that this tragic conjunction was not a coincidence.²⁸

Stone has vigorously defended his belief that Kennedy was eager to wind down the Cold War, arguing throughout the 1990s that the president disagreed with the Joint Chiefs over Cuba and Laos, and that Kennedy was really a dove. Looking back at the administration’s achievements, this is what Stone sees:

...an early form of détente under way with Khrushchev (the October '62 deal: no U.S. invasion, no Soviet missiles), the groundbreaking signing of the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and installation of the 'hot line,' the American University speech, the back-door negotiations with Castro—and the fact, not speculation, that repeatedly during his presidency, Kennedy turned down requests for combat troops in Vietnam despite heavy pressure from the Joint Chiefs.²⁹

Stone is not alone in voicing such sentiments, but it is more than a bit ironic that it has been former Kennedy administration officials, most notably Schlesinger, who have been most vocal in also arguing such a position. Here's what Schlesinger wrote in *The Wall Street Journal* in 1992:

...from the beginning to the end of his administration, [Kennedy] steadily opposed repeated military recommendations that he introduce an American expeditionary force. Having watched the French army fail in Vietnam in 1951, he had no desire to send the American Army into the same quagmire.³⁰

Schlesinger went on to write that "in July 1962 President Kennedy instructed Robert McNamara, the secretary of defense, to start planning for the phased withdrawal of the American advisors." In October, Schlesinger argued, Kennedy ordered the return of 1,000 advisors, but after Dallas, Johnson called "for the maintenance of American military programs in Vietnam 'at levels as high' as before—reversing the Kennedy withdrawal policy."³¹ Stone wholeheartedly agrees with such an analysis, as he has written that "It is clearly my belief that Kennedy would never have allowed us to escalate our commitment so disastrously in Vietnam."³²

So what is one to make of Stone's view of Kennedy? How accurate is it? First of all, there exists the enormous irony that while Stone does not trust the government, he seems to completely trust Kennedy. As Ron Rosenbaum has noted,

...curiously, otherwise skeptical assassination buffs are among the last misty-eyed believers in Camelot... By now, of course, an accumulation of sordid revelations has made J.F.K.'s Washington seem less like Arthur's Camelot than Capone's Chicago.³³

Historians have vigorously challenged Stone's view of a cautious and isolationist Kennedy. Richard Reeves has argued that Kennedy's advisors never heard

comments from the president regarding withdrawal, and notes that at the time of Kennedy's death the United States had 16,500 men in Vietnam, was planning on adding several thousand more, and had just orchestrated the Diem coup in October of 1963.

Stone's film emphasized the now famous Kennedy line to Walter Cronkite that "in the final analysis, it's their war." But one needs to look at the entire text, as later, in the same interview with Cronkite, Kennedy said that "I don't agree with those who say we should withdraw. That would be a great mistake."³⁴ And in an interview with NBC at the time Kennedy said he believed in the Domino Theory, and that the fall of Saigon to Communism would lead to the collapse of America's position throughout Asia.³⁵ As Karnow has written, "Nothing in Kennedy's public utterances... suggested that he even remotely envisioned scuttling Vietnam." In fact, there is ample evidence of exactly the opposite of Stone's view of Kennedy. For example, the speech he would have delivered in Dallas the day of his assassination stated that involvement in Vietnam could be "painful, risky, and costly... but we dare not weary of the task."³⁶

Many of Kennedy's own colleagues echoed such views. In 1964 Robert Kennedy said that "we certainly considered what would be the result if you abandon Vietnam, even Southeast Asia, and whether it was worthwhile trying to keep a hold on to." When specifically asked what his brother thought, Robert Kennedy said that "he reached the conclusion that it was probably worthwhile."³⁷ Only long after Vietnam became a stalemate did administration officials begin to argue that Kennedy would have withdrawn.

In important ways, Stone's romantic view of Kennedy obscures the larger consequences of the president's foreign policy. For example, even when criticizing the Vietnam War, many continue even today to speak of American actions as noble, as, in the words of Karnow, "motivated by the loftiest of intentions."³⁸ In this formation the humanitarian crisis of Vietnam was the result of bad policies, misplaced trust, and of evil policy makers—simply an unusual and unfortunate aberration in policy, not the result of the West's forceful domination of the non-Western world.

Attributing the decline of America as a result of the events of November 22, 1963, according to Noam Chomsky, is merely an effort to "preserve the image of Camelot and the reputation of its courtiers."³⁹ The enormous energy that has been put into portraying the assassination as the end of innocence, as a "turning point" in American policy, disregards the fact that Kennedy can be seen as merely a continuum of America's post World War II policy towards the rest of the world. To Chomsky, defenders of the theory that Kennedy advocated "withdrawal without victory" are merely trying to rewrite history, and he has pointed out that

in the “Two weeks before Kennedy’s assassination, there is not a single phrase in the... internal record that even hints at withdrawal without victory.”⁴⁰

So perhaps efforts to blame Johnson for the escalation of the war, as demonstrated by Stone’s film and by Schlesinger’s much discussed *Wall Street Journal* article mentioned above, are merely nothing more than an effort to enhance the Kennedy legacy.

Stone has also consistently reiterated his belief that Kennedy was a different kind of politician, one who was viewed as a threat to the establishment. Stone has hypothesized that “Looming ahead was his certain victory in 1964 with the specter of a Kennedy dynasty lasting well into the 1970s.”⁴¹ But it is quite hard to argue that Kennedy was a threat to the wealthy. He enacted enormous tax cuts, and his cabinet contained many conservatives, most notably his secretary of the treasury, C. Douglas Dillon, a lifelong Republican. Furthermore, there are ample examples of Kennedy’s hesitancy to overturn the established order. For one, it could very well be argued that Kennedy was actually quite timid on civil rights. Stone is thus overly romantic in suggesting that Kennedy did not see himself as either a member of or protector of the elite.

And though Stone would never admit it, there are, in fact, striking parallels, though their use of imagery was quite different, between the Kennedy and Reagan administrations, in their fiscal policies, aggressive military actions, enormous defense buildup, and desire to distinguish themselves from the temerity of the previous administration.⁴² As Michael Albert has pointed out, “as to the military industrial complex, before Reagan, John Kennedy was arguably its best friend.”⁴³

And let us not forget that Kennedy’s foreign policy was extremely aggressive. Stone opens his film with Eisenhower’s farewell address, warning of the power of the Military Industrial Complex, but he neglects to point out that Kennedy’s campaign rhetoric, as well as his own inaugural address, were filled with aggressive language concerning the Cold War. And the reality matched the rhetoric. For example, among other foreign policy moves, the Kennedy Administration supported a military coup in Guatemala, attempted to retard land reform in the Dominican Republic, aided a coup in Iraq that began Sadaam Hussein’s rise to power, and, most notably, presided over Operation Mongoose, which attempted to overthrow the Cuban government.⁴⁴

Stone has indicated on numerous occasions that he wants to be remembered as a good historian as well as a good dramatist. Stone, it must be remembered, did not market the film as a work of fiction. Yet his efforts to portray himself as an historian cannot be deemed entirely successful. Stone’s film should thus correctly be faulted for its depiction of how Kennedy would have acted regarding Vietnam had he lived.

More interestingly, one must ask the question: how even daring and bold is, in fact, Stone's romantic view of Kennedy? It could be argued that Stone actually takes very few risks when he portrays Kennedy in such a positive light, as Kennedy remains a revered figure by the American public. In the Gallup polls of the past ten years, Kennedy is always viewed by the public as one of the top three presidents in American history. And these numbers do not merely reflect nostalgia, either. His average poll ratings while president, a 70% approval rate, are the single highest of any president since modern polling began. And Kennedy is unique among American presidents in that his ratings have remained remarkably constant over the past decades.⁴⁵ Changes in a president's rating over time are the norm, not the exception. But Kennedy's high approval has been a constant.

Stone's views on government are also not out of step with those shared by most Americans, either. There is an enormous irony in the political implications of Stone's efforts to fuel mistrust in government. Again, there is a striking comparison here with Ronald Reagan. As Nicholas Lemann has noted, "Stone's idea that it's healthy for Americans to regard the federal government with profound suspicion and mistrust is a perfect fit with Reagan Republicanism, which I doubt is the stated ideology of the makers of *JFK*."⁴⁶ By steadily attacking the federal government, Stone is tapping into a national trend that began during the 1960s and the civil rights movement, when segregationists argued for "state's rights" and for the federal government to reduce its role in national affairs, a sentiment that would continue through the tax revolt of the 1970s as well as with the efforts, over the past two decades, to dismantle the welfare state.

So perhaps Stone's efforts to praise Kennedy as a fallen prince and to label the federal government as inept, dishonest, and a real threat to American freedoms are not so revolutionary after all. Rather than challenging accepted norms, Stone might instead be simply reinforcing beliefs that his film's audience had about Kennedy, Vietnam, and the government even before they viewed his film.

And though it has not been the subject of this paper, I might also add that Stone's view of a conspiracy to kill Kennedy is also in line with most people's sentiments. In the spring of 1964, even before the Warren Commission, 33% of Americans believed Kennedy was killed by a conspiracy.⁴⁷ Suspicion only grew in the following years. By the time of *JFK*'s release, 77% of Americans did not believe the Warren Commission, but that there had been a conspiracy to kill Kennedy.⁴⁸

Thus Stone's many critics grievously err when they label him a radical filmmaker. Rather, reacting against the trauma of Kennedy's assassination, Stone instead offers a nostalgic view of the late President that not only distorts history, but also confirms the American public's own positive view of the Kennedy administration.

Notes

1. "Stone on Stone's Image," in Robert Brent Toplin, ed., *Oliver Stone's USA – Film, History, and Controversy* (Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 2000), p. 53.
2. William W. Phillips, Review of the film *JFK*, *The Journal of American History*, V. 79, Issue 3, "Discovering America: A Special Issue" (Dec., 1992), p. 1265.
3. Robert Anson, "The Shooting of JFK," *Esquire*, November 1991.
4. Norman Kagan, *The Cinema of Oliver Stone* (New York, Continuum, 2000), p. 184.
5. Noam Chomsky, *Rethinking Camelot – JFK, the Vietnam War, and U.S. Political Culture* (Boston, South End Press, 1993), p. 65.
6. James Riordan, *Stone – The Controversies, Excesses, and Exploits of a Radical Filmmaker* (New York, Hyperion, 1995), p. 413.
7. Stanley Karnow, Review of the film *JFK*, in Mark C. Carnes, ed., *Past Imperfect – History According to the Movies* (New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1995), p. 270.
8. Thomas C. Reeves, Review of the film *JFK*, *The Journal of American History*, V. 79, Issue 3, "Discovering America: A Special Issue" (Dec., 1992), p. 1263.
9. William W. Phillips, Review of the film *JFK*, *The Journal of American History*, V. 79, Issue 3, "Discovering America: A Special Issue" (Dec., 1992), p. 1264.
10. Frank Beaver, *Oliver Stone: Wakeup Cinema* (New York, Twain Publishers, 1994), p. 161.
11. Bernard Weinraub, "Valenti Calls 'J.F.K.' 'Hoax' and 'Smear,'" *New York Times*, April 2, 1992.
12. Joseph Califano, "A Concoction Of Lies And Distortions," *Wall Street Journal*, January 28, 1992.
13. Robert A. Rosenstone, "JFK: Historical Fact/Historical Film," in Don Kunz, ed., *The Films of Oliver Stone* (Lanham, Maryland, Scarecrow Press, 1997), p. 208.
14. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "JFK: Truth And Fiction," *Wall Street Journal*, January 10, 1992.
15. Kenneth Auchincloss, Ginny Carroll, and Maggie Malone, "Twisted History," *Newsweek*, December 23, 1991.
16. Nicholas Lemann, "The Case Against Jim Garrison," *GQ*, January 1992.
17. David Belin, "Earl Warren's Assassins," *New York Times*, March 7, 1992.
18. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "JFK: Truth And Fiction," *Wall Street Journal*, January 10, 1992.
19. Roger Ebert, "Pundits Go Astray Taking Aim At JFK," *Universal Press Syndicate*, January 15, 1992.
20. Robert Brent Toplin, *History by Hollywood – The Use and Abuse of the American Past* (Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1996), p. 47.
21. Michael L. Kurtz, "Oliver Stone, JFK, and History," in Robert Brent Toplin, ed., *Oliver Stone's USA – Film, History, and Controversy* (Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 2000), p. 174.
22. Norman Mailer, "Footfalls In the Crypt," *Vanity Fair*, February 1992.
23. Alan Dershowitz, "Suppression Of The Facts Grants Stone A Broad Brush," *Los Angeles Times*, December 25, 1991.
24. Gary Crowder, "Clarifying the Conspiracy: An Interview with Oliver Stone," in Charles L.P. Silet, ed., *Oliver Stone Interviews* (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2001), p. 103.

25. Kenneth Auchincloss, Ginny Carroll, and Maggie Malone, "Twisted History," *Newsweek*, December 23, 1991.
26. Norman Kagan, *The Cinema of Oliver Stone* (New York, Continuum, 2000), p. 183.
27. Michel Cement and Hubert Niogret, "A Destabilized America," in Charles L.P. Silet, ed., *Oliver Stone Interviews* (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2001), p. 112.
28. Oliver Stone, "Oliver Stone Talks Back," *Premiere*, January 1992.
29. Oliver Stone, "JFK Is Not Responsible – Choosing To Ignore The Evidence Is," *Los Angeles Times*, January 6, 1992.
30. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "JFK: Truth And Fiction," *Wall Street Journal*, January 10, 1992.
31. *Ibid.*
32. Oliver Stone, "On Nixon and JFK," in Robert Brent Toplin, ed., *Oliver Stone's USA – Film, History, and Controversy* (Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 2000), p. 263.
33. Ron Rosenbaum, "Taking A Darker View," *Time*, January 13, 1992.
34. Thomas C. Reeves, Review of the film *JFK*, *The Journal of American History*, V. 79, Issue 3, "Discovering America: A Special Issue" (Dec., 1992), p. 1265.
35. Leslie Gelb, "Kennedy and Vietnam," *New York Times*, January 9, 1992.
36. Stanley Karnow, Review of the film *JFK*, in Mark C. Carnes, ed., *Past Imperfect – History According to the Movies* (New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1995), p. 272.
37. Nicholas Lemann, "The Case Against Jim Garrison," *GQ*, January 1992.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
41. "Stone on Stone's Image," in Robert Brent Toplin, ed., *Oliver Stone's USA – Film, History, and Controversy* (Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 2000), p. 61.
42. Noam Chomsky, *Rethinking Camelot – JFK, the Vietnam War, and U.S. Political Culture* (Boston, South End Press, 1993), p. 147.
43. *Ibid.*
44. Alexander Cockburn, "J.F.K. And JFK," *Nation*, January 6-13, 1992.
45. www.gallup.com/poll/releases/pro10206b.asp
46. Nicholas Lemann, Response to Oliver Stone, *Nation*, April, 1992.
47. Jeffrey Morley, "The Political Rorschach Test," *Los Angeles Times*, December 8, 1991.
48. Norman Kagan, *The Cinema of Oliver Stone* (New York, Continuum, 2000), p. 183.

BERNARD VON BOTHMER earned a B.A. with Honors in American Civilization from Brown University in 1989 and an M.A. in American history from Stanford University in 1993. He is currently writing his Ph.D. dissertation in American history at Indiana University, entitled "Blaming the 'Sixties': The Political Use of an Era." Before and after his M.A. program, he taught secondary school history for 10 years. He is currently an Adjunct Instructor at the University of San Francisco and at Contra Costa College.