

BEAT THE DEVIL.

J.F.K. and JFK

Whether J.F.K. was killed by a lone assassin or by a conspiracy has as much to do with the subsequent contours of American politics as if he had tripped over one of Caroline's dolls and broken his neck in the White House nursery.

Of course many people think otherwise, reckoning that once it can be demonstrated that the Warren Commission was wrong and Oswald was not the lone killer, then we face the reality of a rightist conspiracy engineered to change the course of history. (The idea of Oswald as a leftist conspiracy of one or more has perhaps fortunately never had the popularity one might have expected.) This is the view taken by Oliver Stone, who has stated in interviews, such as one in *Spin*, that "Kennedy was really moving to end the cold war and sign a nuclear treaty with the Soviets; he would not have gone to war in Southeast Asia. He was starting a backdoor negotiation with Castro." Instead of which good things, there was "the first coup d'état in America."

In *JFK*, Stone leaves no doubt about the coup's sponsors. A sequence in grainy black-and-white, presumably designed for extra *vérité*, shows L.B.J. planning the assassination with the Joint Chiefs of Staff. This is a \$40 million equivalent of *MacBird*, though Stone's model is another Shakespeare play.

The core of this vision of history is put by Kevin Costner in his role as New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison:

We have all become Hamlets in our country, children of a slain father-leader whose killers still possess the throne. The ghost of John Kennedy confronts us with the secret murder at the heart of the American dream. He forces on us the appalling question: Of what is our Constitution made? What is our citizenship—and more, our lives—worth? What is the future, where a President can be assassinated under conspicuously suspicious circumstances, while the machinery of legal action scarcely trembles? How many political murders disguised as heart attacks, cancer, suicides, airplane and car crashes, drug overdoses, will occur before they are exposed for what they are?

Stone wrote those words himself (and at one point even planned to have the ghost of J.F.K. appear to Garrison as he stood in his kitchen making a chicken sandwich while watching news of Bobby Kennedy's assassination). It's an important passage, for in its truly fascist yearning for the "father-leader" taken from the children-people by conspiracy, it accurately catches the crippling nuttiness of what passes amid some sectors of the left (admittedly a pretty nebulous concept these days) as mature analysis and propaganda: that virtue in government died in Dallas, and that a "secret agenda" has perverted the national destiny.

With this demented optic, left ultimately joins hands with right, as happened during the Gulf War when the para-Birchist Craig Hulet won an enthusiastic following amid radical circles for his conspiratorial account of the Bush regime's policy even though anyone with half a brain could see after about thirty seconds exactly where he was coming from. Out the window goes any sensible analysis of institutions, economic trends and pressures, continuities in corporate and class in-

terest and all the other elements constituting the open secrets and agendas of American capitalism.

The Ancestry of JFK

The psychic bloodlines of *JFK* may be traced at least in part to Ellen Ray, who met Oliver Stone in an elevator in Havana and placed a copy of Garrison's *On the Trail of the Assassins* in his hand. Along with Bill Schaap, Ray had published Garrison's book and, as I vividly recall from several conversations, has long felt that history did a U-turn for the worse when conspiracy laid J.F.K. low. Why the publishers of *Covert Action Information Bulletin* and *Lies of Our Times* should take this position I'm not sure, unless we take a biographical approach and argue that maybe it all goes back to Ellen's Catholic girlhood in Massachusetts, with an icon of J.F.K. on the wall. But then lots of other people including Bill didn't grow up as R.C. Mass.-based Jack fans, so the reasons probably lie elsewhere.

Intellectual ancestry for the assertion that J.F.K. would have pulled the United States out of Vietnam can be traced back to an essay by Peter Dale Scott, "Vietnamization and the Drama of the Pentagon Papers," which appeared in Volume V of the Senator Gravel edition of the "Pentagon Papers," published by Beacon Press in 1972. This volume, edited by Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn, offered critical commentary designed to put the Papers in perspective.

Scott, now a professor of English at U.C. Berkeley, attempted to prove by philological analysis that whereas the official editors of the Papers working in the Pentagon—headed by Leslie Gelb and reporting to Robert McNamara—wanted to show there was continuity of policy between J.F.K. and L.B.J., the opposite was the case. Scott's focus was on National Security Action Memorandum 273 and on shifts in the verbal expressions of policies that occurred between the Honolulu conference of November 20, 1963, attended by J.F.K.'s top advisers, and L.B.J.'s November 24 policy meeting on Vietnam, the first in the wake of J.F.K.'s murder and including the same advisers, which led to the adoption of N.S.A.M. 273 immediately thereafter.

Scott lays enormous weight upon minute textual alterations, signaling these with urgent italic. Thus, on October 2 the Kennedy position was "The security of South Vietnam is a major interest of the United States as other free nations [sic]. We will adhere to our policy of working with the people and Government of South Vietnam to deny this country to communism and to suppress the externally stimulated and supported insurgency of the Viet Cong as promptly as possible. Effective performance in this undertaking is the central objective of our policy in South Vietnam."

Such, in Scott's yearning interpretation, was the language of benign intent, as contrasted with the N.S.A.M. 273 language of November 24: "It remains the central objective of the United States in South Vietnam to assist the people and Government of that country to win their contest against the externally directed and supported communist conspiracy. The test of all US decisions and actions in this area should be the

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effectiveness of their contributions to this purpose.”

To the sensible eye, those differences may be credited to the determination of an uncertain Johnson White House, following the assassination, to show the world its resolve, as opposed to the more anfractuious approach of a Kennedy White House trying to steer a path through the Buddhist crisis, the impending coup against Diem, the discontent of some liberals at growing involvement and the rage of conservatives that not enough was being done.

There was, however, no change in policy, and the measure of Peter Dale Scott's fantasizing may be gauged by his claim later in the same essay for the “overall Kennedy strategy for movement towards international relaxation of the cold war and conversion to a full-employment civilian economy at home.” Military spending was slowing near the end of Kennedy's term for exactly the same reason it slowed near the end of Ronald Reagan's season in office. The largest and most rapid military buildup in the peacetime history of the United States had been accomplished. J.F.K. had doubled the number of Polaris nuclear submarines; increased Minuteman purchases by 75 percent, tactical nukes in Europe by 60 percent and the total number of weapons in the strategic alert force by 100 percent.

Kennedy, having fought the 1960 election partly on an imaginary missile gap, then acted as if this missile gap were genuine. In his vivid account in *High Priests of Waste*, Ernie Fitzgerald suggests that the military spending surge of the Kennedy years definitively undermined all rational standards of productivity and cost control achieved in the preceding seven decades (though an old auto worker from the Chrysler plant in Newcastle, Indiana, once remarked to me that such declines could be traced back to the cost-plus contracts of the Second World War). The idea that Kennedy was methodically tilting toward a full-employment civilian economy is preposterous.

Scott's essay has had a pertinacious half-life, and one of those paying tribute to it is a military historian named John Newman, one of Stone's advisers on the film. Newman's *JFK and Vietnam* first came into the offices of Sheridan Square Press, Ray and Schaap's publishing house, whence it was passed on to Stone, who assisted in its dispatch to Warner Books (part of the conglomerate backing *JFK*), which is publishing the book in February.

JFK and Vietnam is a serious book with two curious features. One is the absence of any substantial evidence for the author's frequently repeated claim that by February or March of 1963 J.F.K. had decided to pull out of Vietnam once the 1964 election was won. Newman's only sources for this are people to whom J.F.K. would, as a matter of habitual political opportunism, have spoken in such terms, such as Senators Mike Mansfield and Wayne Morse, both of whom, particularly the latter, were critical of J.F.K.'s escalation in Vietnam. Against their recollections may be placed the accounts of those to whom J.F.K. spoke out of the other side of his mouth, such as Dean Rusk or even R.F.K.

The other curious feature is Newman's inference that the assassination should be re-examined in the light of his con-

clusion that L.B.J. reversed J.F.K.'s stance on Vietnam. Perhaps he wrote this late section of the book after association with Stone had commenced. The *ciné vérité* of L.B.J. hatching the coup with the Joint Chiefs was but a short step, and Newman was on hand for the press briefings on *JFK* in Los Angeles in mid-December, ready with scholarly backup.

The Junkyard of History

Oliver Stone looks upon the assassination as the coffin of all the bright hopes of the early sixties. To get a truer insight all you have to do is go to a junkyard or an auto museum and look at the colors. Bright hopes were really being born in the mid-fifties, with Detroit palettes of desert rose, aqua, even paisley. By the time of the New Frontier the colors had darkened into the dreary greens, tans and drab blues of combat. With their prophetic three-year lead times, the colors told the story. Kennedy had betrayed the hopes of people like Stone before he had stepped off the inauguration stand.

“Get a life,” Captain Kirk once told some Trekkies. Get some history too. Critics of *JFK* like Tom Wicker have fretted that “in an era when mistrust of government and loss of confidence in institutions (the press not least) are widespread and virulent, such a suggestion [i.e., that representatives of the ruling elites murdered J.F.K.] seems a dubious public service.” In fact the dubious public service is to suggest that J.F.K. himself was not a functional representative of those elites.

The real J.F.K. backed a military coup in Guatemala to keep out Arévalo, denied the Dominican Republic the possibility of land reform, helped promote a devastating cycle of Latin American history, including the anticipatory motions of the coup in Brazil, and backed a Baathist coup in Iraq that set a certain native of Tikrit on the path to power. He presided over Operation Mongoose, inflicting terror upon Cuba. At the very moment bullets brought J.F.K.'s life to its conclusion in Dallas, a C.I.A. officer operating firmly within the bounds of Kennedy's policy was handing poison to a Cuban agent in Paris, designed to kill Castro.

Lawrence J. Bassett and Stephen Pelz wrote in the 1989 collection *Kennedy's Quest for Victory* that “by putting American advisers in harm's way . . . he helped to engage American patriotism in a war against the Vietnamese people. By arguing that Vietnam was a test of the West's ability to defeat the people's war strategy and a test of American credibility in the Cold War, he raised the costs of withdrawal for his successor.” J.F.K. sent in 16,000 advisers, sponsored the strategic hamlet program, launched napalm and defoliation upon the South and covert terror and sabotage upon the North. He never entertained the idea of a settlement as advocated by J.K. Galbraith when the latter was Ambassador to India.

Thomas Paterson, editor of this volume, put it well. Only out of respect for history “emerges unpleasant reality and the need to reckon with a past that has not always matched the selfless and self-satisfying image Americans have of their foreign policy and of Kennedy as their young, fallen hero who never had a chance. Actually, he had his chance, and he failed.”



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