

New Nonfiction from M.C. Armstrong: "J.F.K. Revisited: Through the Looking-Glass"

I write this review of Oliver Stone's new film during the most bizarre month in America since the January of the Capitol riots and the de-platforming of Donald Trump, a president who promised to release the final government files on the assassination of John F. Kennedy. This November, a subculture of Americans known as QAnon gathered in Dealey Plaza. During the same month that Khalil Islam and Muhammad A. Aziz were exonerated in the 1965 murder of Malcom X, QAnon held vigil in Dallas, Texas. The Q crowd sang Michael Jackson's "We Are the World" as they awaited the resurrection of President Kennedy's dead son, JFK Jr., at the site of his father's murder. I think it's fair to say that what the stories of Q and X tell us, at the very least, is this: America has a problem with truth-telling.

Enter Oliver Stone and *JFK Revisited: Through the Looking Glass*. I locate Stone's film squarely in the camp of the lawyers, experts, and citizen-journalists who worked tirelessly to absolve Muhammad and Islam. Stone's argument in this revelatory documentary, is that Lee Harvey Oswald may also be innocent. Aligning himself with the facts revealed by unredacted government documents from the 1990s, as well as the conclusions of the 1976 House Select Committee on Assassinations, Stone argues that President Kennedy was murdered by a CIA conspiracy. Whereas Trump and his supporters may have indeed *attempted* a coup d'etat on January 6, 2021, Stone argues that the CIA performed a successful coup on November 22, 1963.



Stone brings the receipts when it comes to proving what he calls the “conspiracy fact.” *JFK Revisited* is structured around two parts. The first part, narrated by Whoopi Goldberg, offers a devastating and compelling forensic analysis of the murder. This segment alone is worth the price of admission. The second part, narrated by Donald Sutherland, invites viewers into the “why” of the murder and reveals, through the voice of Robert F. Kennedy’s son, that on the day after the assassination in Dallas, the attorney general’s first reaction was to call the CIA and ask if they had “conducted this horror.” Of course, five years later, RFK himself would be gunned down in Los Angeles during his run for president.

The structure of the first part is chronological and goes something like this: Here is a vision of America in 1963 just before the assassination (we begin with President Kennedy’s famous commencement address at American University, known to some as the “Peace Speech”). The summer is then followed by

the fall and the first eyewitness accounts of the murder. Then comes the story of revision, the eyewitnesses to a shooter from the famous "grassy knoll" suppressed or ignored as Lyndon Johnson places Allen Dulles, former director of the CIA, in charge of the investigation into the murder of the man who fired Dulles. After briefly recapitulating Dulles' findings as detailed in the Warren Commission and giving voice to the dissenting members of that body (like Senator Russell Long), Stone follows that dissent as it builds into the 1970s and culminates with the American public witnessing the murder for the first time on national television when Geraldo Rivera asks the African American comedian, Dick Gregory, to narrate the killing as documented by the home movie known as "the Zapruder film." Without citizen-journalists like Abraham Zapruder, it is quite possible that America, to this day, would still be under the spell of the Warren Commission.

Echoing the rhetorical power of Gregory and Rivera, Stone and Goldberg together tell the story of how Stone's own dramatization of the murder, the 1991 movie, *JFK*, catalyzed renewed public interest in the assassination. Just as Rivera's show helped create momentum for the work of the House Select Committee, so did Stone's Academy Award-winning movie inspire a fresh release of JFK files during the Clinton administration. It is through these unredacted primary documents and from the testimony of experts like Cyril Wecht, former president of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, that Stone constructs the strongest part of his argument: the refutation of the "magic bullet theory." As part one concludes, Stone reveals that the chain-of-custody on the magic bullet was broken. He shows a future American president, Gerald Ford, altering evidence. He gives voice to three women witnesses from the Texas School Book Depository who were systematically suppressed from the public record. But perhaps, more important than anything, through this people's history of the Kennedy assassination, Stone demonstrates that there were, beyond a reasonable doubt, more than three shots fired that

day in Dallas. And as members of the Warren Commission themselves knew, if there were more than three shots, than there was more than one gunman and, thus, a conspiracy.

Recent peer-reviewed scholarship from Josiah Thompson (*Last Second in Dallas*, University of Kansas Press, 2021) supports Stone's forensic analysis. This achievement of taking the story of the Kennedy assassination from "conspiracy theory" to "conspiracy fact" cannot be understated and could not have happened without a people's movement, a subculture of JFK researchers dedicated to discovering the truth. Much like those committed to the exoneration of Muhammad and Islam, this community has worked tirelessly over the span of decades in the name of justice. *JFK Revisited* is a tremendous democratic accomplishment, especially considering the ongoing obstacles of state propaganda in collaboration with corporate media partners. What remains uncertain, however, and what constitutes the weaker part of Stone's film, is the "why" and the "who." I wouldn't blame viewers who walk away from the two-hour version of *JFK Revisited* still hungry for answers.

Stone claims Kennedy was killed because the thirty-fifth president wanted to end the Cold War and went behind the CIA's back to broker peace with Russia and Cuba, among others. Stone, a veteran of the Vietnam War, argues through a host of primary documents, that Kennedy wanted to end the war in Vietnam, not escalate it like his successor, Lyndon Johnson. However, if the second part of the film doesn't convince you that a war-crazed CIA was behind the conspiracy, perhaps Stone's soon-to-be-released four-hour version will more thoroughly address that question. Or perhaps the "why" and the "who" will continue to evade the American public until this country has a leader with courage. Donald Trump was not that president. He did not keep his campaign promise. He caved to CIA appeals and refused to release the final JFK files. Maybe Joe Biden, who often poses with a bust of RFK in the Oval Office, will be that man. Early in his career, Biden often

talked about the legacy of the Kennedy brothers and the tragic consequences that followed out of their murders. As late as 2019, Biden went on the record to talk about the way the assassinations of “the late 70s” still haunted the political landscape. Journalists had to correct Biden and remind him that these murders took place in the 1960s. But Biden, at the very least, seems to know that President John F. Kennedy, like his son, is dead. *JFK Revisited* will not be able to convince QAnon supporters that Kennedy and his son are never coming back. But for that small silenced minority of Americans who still read and don't think of truth as some kind of joke worthy of air-quotes, Stone's documentary just might do that thing that our post-truth culture seems algorithmically designed to prevent: It might just change your mind.