



**HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS**

**Hugvísindasvið**

# **Shooting the President**

*A Critical Study of the Films JFK and Death of a President*

**Ritgerð til BA prófs í ensku**

**Pétur Sæmundsen**

**Maí 2013**

**Háskóli Íslands**

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**Enska**

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**Pétur Sæmundsen**

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**Máí 2013**



## **Summary**

This essay takes a look at how films can be made to alter the way people think about certain subjects. In this instance it compares two films about the assassination of the President of the United States. One is *JFK*, a depiction of the true events of John F. Kennedy's assassination which is directed and written for the screen by Oliver Stone and the other is *Death of a President*, a fictional depiction of the assassination of George W. Bush, written and directed by Gabriel Range. I will study the different styles of the films, how they portray the assassination plots differently and how it affected society and why it did the way it did. First it will go briefly over the presidents' careers and what stood out during their presidency. The next chapter will be about the films themselves, how they are written, how they portray the presidents and brief synopses of the films. It will also briefly introduce the directors and how the films were received by the media and the public. The next chapter will go into the assassinations in detail and the similarities between the two films and it will also focus on the actions of the Vice Presidents in the films.

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## Introduction

Films have always been, in my opinion, the best way to portray a story. Not that books cannot do this splendidly but, for the most part, there is something missing. A lingering look, a subtle change in colour scheme or even music. Films have the power to turn a written text into something greater than that. I have always loved movies but there is another thing that I am oddly attracted to: murder and mayhem, catastrophes and the deaths of important people. If I have to give a reason why, then it must be because I am so captivated by the whole investigation that ensues. When there is a catastrophe with numerous casualties, be it accidental or deliberate, some sort of entity, person or society needs to take responsibility because it is in our nature to seek the truth. This results in possible cover-ups, for the truth might be dangerous, and that results in conspiracy theories and nowhere in the world are the conspiracy theorists more vocal and active as they are in the USA. This is the inspiration for this essay.

The United States is the home of film entertainment, releasing dozens of prominent movies each year, but it is also the place where many of the most high-profile politicians and activists of recent history have been murdered. During the 1960s and 70s, there was a time in the United States when things seemed to be spinning out of control for their citizens, spokespeople and potential or standing political leaders. In 1968, African-American civil rights leader and Baptist minister Martin Luther King Jr. was shot and killed while staying in Memphis where he planned to have a peaceful protest.<sup>1</sup> Three years earlier, Malcolm X, another civil rights figure was shot and killed when he was giving a speech in New York.<sup>2</sup> Brothers John and Robert Kennedy were assassinated, John as a sitting President of the United States in 1963<sup>3</sup> and Robert as he was running for presidency after his brother's death five years later.<sup>4</sup> These and other instances what seemed to be normal people were succumbing to insanity and desperate measures in an unprecedented fashion. A reverend called Jim Jones formed a commune called Jonestown, calling it a utopia, only to force his followers to perform ritualistic mass suicide killing over 900 people. A young girl named Brenda Spencer opened fire

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<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Rosenberg, "Martin Luther King Jr. Assassinated". *20<sup>th</sup> Century History*. About.com, no date. Web. 28. April 2013. <http://history1900s.about.com/cs/martinlutherking/a/mlkassass.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Stephanie McKinney, "Malcolm X". *20<sup>th</sup> Century History*. About.com, no date. Web. 28. April 2013. <http://history1900s.about.com/od/people/a/Malcolm-X.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Goss, "President John F. Kennedy's Assassination". *20<sup>th</sup> Century History*. About.com, no date. Web. 28. April 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Rosenberg, "Robert Kennedy Assassination". *20<sup>th</sup> Century History*. About.com, no date. Web. 28. April 2013. <http://history1900s.about.com/od/1960s/a/Robert-Kennedy-Assassination.htm>

on elementary school children, killing the principal who tried to save innocent children. Her reason was that she said she did not like Mondays.<sup>5</sup> These events are too common for a free, independent nation to consider as normal but it was, or even is, all too common. Because of these events, violence is a sizeable part of United States's culture and history, however one looks at it. So much so, that films have adapted many of these horrific events and immortalized them on the silver screen.

Violence has always been a big part of the entertainment business be it old scary stories, movies or video games. For the most part, people enjoy it. It does not make us sociopaths, entertainment has always been a way to escape from reality. Real life may be getting more and more tedious and uninteresting so a little violence in entertainment grabs our attention. To many it feels exploitative to tell a true story of a man from history by mostly focusing on the violence that surrounded that person in time. But it is interesting to see and experience how these people dealt with the violence first-hand and imagining cameras capturing every thrilling, hair-raising moment of it.

Many of these films are controversial and many question their validity or why they are made in the first place. But it has been shown that films are such a powerful medium that instead of sad events being forgotten, they are remembered and can make people change their minds on the subject. I have chosen to write about two different movies concerning similar events. One movie is about the real assassination of President John F. Kennedy, made in 1991, and the other about the fictional assassination of President George W. Bush, made in 2006. Both of these movies caused quite a stir when released and are considered highly controversial. I will study both films and the Presidents themselves, comparing them and determining what kind of impact they had on the society. First I will write about both presidents, talk briefly about their lives and their careers, focusing on what made them memorable in terms of American history. After that I will focus on the films themselves, the directors, the reviews and criticisms, and what kind of impact they had on the American people.

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<sup>5</sup> The Milwaukee Journal, "Sniping Suspect had a Grim Goal." *The Milwaukee Journal* 30 Jan. 1979 pp 4. *Google News*. Web. 24 April 2013.

## **The President of the United States of America**

The President of the United States of America is often considered the most powerful man in the world and rightly so. He leads the executive branch of the federal government, he is the commander-in-chief of one of the world's largest armed forces and his reactions and decisions are pivotal in world affairs, mainly concerning peace or war. With this title comes great responsibility and these men have to be able to handle the pressures that come with it. They have to be able to maintain good relationships with the other powerful countries of the world as there is always tension over various global issues like pollution, war and oil. It does not matter what they do, if they go the more peaceful, diplomatic route or the more aggressive, forceful route, they can never please everybody. Everything they do or do not do comes under criticism and that is how they prove themselves as leaders, how they handle the criticism and the ever present weight of his country on his shoulders. For these reasons and more, this particular profession has produced many great and colorful characters throughout history, so making a film about these people should not be challenging. There is abundance of footage from press conferences, speeches and other large social functions, and various things can happen in the four years the President of the United States stays in office so filmmakers have a lot to work with.

There are many movies about The President of the United States, be they fictional, documentary or a biographical. There have been great films and controversial ones, which can also be said about the presidents themselves. Amongst them are two memorable films about two of the U.S. Presidents. One of the presidents is considered great but the other more controversial but both of the movies are considered highly controversial, both in their own unique way. These are Oliver Stone's *JFK* and Gabriel Range's *Death of a President*. I will discuss the similarities and differences, the good and the bad to determine if these films had any impact on the society and social understanding of the death of such a powerful man as The President of the United States. First I will introduce the two presidents that are the main focus of the two films.



## John Fitzgerald Kennedy

John F. Kennedy was born in Brookline, Massachusetts on May 29th 1917. He graduated from Harvard in 1940<sup>6</sup> with a Bachelor's degree in international affairs.<sup>7</sup> After fighting in World War II he became a Democratic Congressman and became a senator in 1953. In 1960 he ran for President on behalf of the Democratic Party against Republican candidate Richard M. Nixon. Kennedy won by the skin of his teeth in the popular vote and became the 35th President of the United States.<sup>8</sup>

He had high hopes for his citizens and people all around the world and set the bar high. In his inauguration speech he talked about how every free citizen could influence their own government as he famously said: "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country". He went on by saying that he wished for the world's nations to unite against tyranny and war and find common ground through peaceful negotiations instead of hostile threats and unnecessary wars.<sup>9</sup> He responded to recent civil unrest in America, triggered by low quality of life for many African American citizens, with determination and called for new civil rights legislation, becoming very popular amongst the black community. He worked hard to spread this mentality further west into Europe but Communism was always a looming threat.<sup>10</sup>

The Soviet Union was a fierce opponent, in what was dubbed the Cold War, and after Cuba became a leftist, communist nation, President Kennedy gave his consent to a CIA operation to overthrow this leftist government in an operation called the Bay of Pigs invasion. Although this had been suggested before Kennedy took office, he was the one to make the decision to execute it. Cuban Exiles were trained by the CIA to invade and overthrow the Prime Minister of Cuba, Fidel Castro. The invasion was a failure as Cuban forces defeated CIA's forces because of a bad landing site and severe overestimation of Cubans' willingness to turn against Castro. Fidel Castro saw his power and influence increase with that victory and thus strengthening the relationship

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<sup>6</sup> White House, "John F. Kennedy". *The White House*. USA Government, no date. Web. 20. April 2013. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/johnfkennedy>

<sup>7</sup> Charles Kenney, *John F. Kennedy: the Presidential Portfolio : History as Told through the Collection of the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum*. New York City: PublicAffairs, 2000. Print.

<sup>8</sup> White House, Web.

<sup>9</sup> John F. Kennedy, "Inaugural Address", *The American Presidency Project*. 20 Jan. 1961. Web. 20 April 2013. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=8032>.

<sup>10</sup> White House, Web.

between Cuba and the Soviet Union.<sup>11</sup> This culminated in one of the most unnerving events in the Cold War, the Cuban missile crisis, where the Soviet Union attempted to ship nuclear missiles to Cuba. However, with his insistence on going the peaceful route, President Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev, leader of the Soviet Union, came to an understanding and the crisis was averted. Kennedy lost much of his credibility after the failed invasion but regained it after his handling of the missile crisis. He seemed to have the support of his people and most of his enemies did not pose an immediate threat.<sup>12</sup>

Kennedy was a great example of a peaceful leader, putting resolutions through negotiations first. To many that was a sign of weakness, not wanting to fight for his ideals and citizens questioned his resolve against the Communist threat. But it was his principle and he stood by it until the day he was assassinated in 1963.

## **George Walker Bush**

George Walker Bush was born in New Haven, Connecticut in 1946. He graduated from Yale and received a business degree from Harvard. After that he moved to Midland, Texas, where he entered the oil business. He became interested in politics, became governor of Texas and was eventually elected into office in 2000, only eight years after his father resigned as the president. Bush's time in office would be riddled with controversial moments and they started even before he was elected president as the election itself was questionable as it took quite some time to find out who actually had won the election, Bush or his democratic opponent, and standing Vice-President, Al Gore. It seemed like Al Gore had won the popular vote but receiving the final tally from Florida's electoral vote proved to be more difficult than expected. They went through recounts and lawsuits but in the end Bush won and became the nation's 43rd President. His presidency started relatively calmly and he focused on education, lower taxes and volunteerism.<sup>13</sup>

He did not make a good impression at first. He seemed unprepared at most press conferences, unable to answer questions articulately, sometimes having a difficult time explaining what he had on his mind and he even seemed to have a lot of trouble

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<sup>11</sup> Christopher Minister, "Cuba: The Bay of Pigs Invasion". *Latin American History*. About.com, no date. Web. 15. March 2013. <http://latinamericanhistory.about.com/od/historyofthecaribbean/a/09bayofpigs.htm>

<sup>12</sup> White House, Web.

<sup>13</sup> White House, "George W. Bush". *The White House*. USA Government, no date. Web. 20. April 2013. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/georgewbush>

understanding simple political guidelines. As a result, his popularity diminished as he did not seem to be able to handle being the President of the United States. He took many, what seemed to the public, small vacations, touring the states, visiting schools and other politicians around the country. It was on one of these trips when disaster struck. On the morning of September 11th 2001, while he sat in a schoolroom in Florida, reading a story with the children, a terrorist group hijacked four commercial airplanes and used them as deadly missiles against high-profile targets, the two World Trade Center towers and the home of USA's Department of Defense, the Pentagon.<sup>14</sup> One aircraft failed to reach its target after the passengers revolted against the hijackers and tried to regain the control and it crashed in a field in Pennsylvania. Its target was assumed to be either the United States Capitol or the White House.<sup>15</sup> Around three thousand innocent lives were lost that day and tens of thousands more injured, including passengers on the airplanes, people inside the buildings and rescue workers.<sup>16</sup> After all the chaos, Bush and his administration saw this as an opportunity. American patriotism was rising and people demanded action. After a terrorist group called al-Quaeda claimed responsibility, people demanded authoritative action from the president. Bush's administration pushed him for a reaction and shortly after Bush declared, what he called, a War on Terror, his vision of trying to rid the world of terrorism. His popularity rose and Americans flocked to support their president on this endeavour. He sent American troops to Afghanistan, where members of al-Quaeda were thought to reside. This is when Bush's actions became more and more questionable. His "War on Terror" seemed extravagant and he kept putting money, resources and manpower into, what seemed, an unwinnable war. He approved the Patriot Act, which in short gave authorities more freedom to arrest or search people's homes without a warrant if there was a possibility they threatened the safety of the country. If that was not enough, in 2003 he decided to invade Iraq, a nation which was ruled by Saddam Hussein, who came into power during the Cold War, ironically with a coup, of which the United States had a lot to do with. Although Iraq did nothing to incite the USA, intelligence agencies were convinced that Iraq was harbouring terrorists and that the Iraqis had a hidden cache of weapons of mass destruction. American forces invaded Iraq, justifying

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<sup>14</sup> Infusion, "9/11 Interactive Timeline". *9/11Memorial*. Infusion, no date. Web. 20. April 2013. <http://timeline.911memorial.org/#Timeline/2>

<sup>15</sup> David Shuster, "9/11 mystery: What was Flight 93's target?" *NBCNews*. National Broadcasting Company, 12 Sept. 2006. Web. 16 Jan. 2012 <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/14778963/#.Txi6Qa5Uss8>.

<sup>16</sup> Infusion, Web.

it by their vague evidence of Iraqis secretly manufacturing weapons of mass destruction, with the intent of using them against Americans. This confounded many American civilians, especially when after an extensive search there were no weapons of mass destruction to be found. After finding nothing, Bush decided that he would free the people of Iraq from the tyranny of Hussein and that resulted in the Iraq War. Bush was convinced he was doing the Iraqi people a favour and giving them democracy. The truth is that it had for the most part the opposite effect as that war has bred a new kind of terrorist tactics and the threat of terrorist attack against America is now higher than before 9/11. The time of his presidency was characterized by strange decisions and extreme laws which left American citizens confused and afraid that their civil liberties were compromised.<sup>17</sup> Even after all this, George Bush was re-elected in 2004, as his popularity seemed to hold throughout his campaign against War on Terror, convincing people that the world was safer.<sup>18</sup> At the end of his presidency he had left scorched earth, thousands of dead soldiers and civilians but no great victories nor great accomplishments.

## The Films

The first thing that needs to be addressed is that although both of the films are about real presidents, only one of them is based on real events. The other is a fictional killing of a real president made to look like a documentary, a genre called mockumentary. The fictional one is Gabriel Range's *Death of a President* which is set in the futuristic year of 2008 (as the movie was made in 2006) and follows the events before and after the assassination of the 43rd U.S. President, George Walker Bush, on the 19 October 2007 in Chicago, Illinois. The other film, *JFK*, focuses on the real assassination of the 35th U.S. president, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, who was shot and killed on 22nd of November, 1963 in Dallas, Texas. The film is based on a book, which was written by the only man who ever brought a public prosecution in the Kennedy murder, New Orleans district attorney Jim Garrison, who is played by Kevin Costner. The movies have different settings and styles of story-telling but ultimately tell the same story. A story how people with a strong enough resolve can bring down the most powerful man on Earth.

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<sup>17</sup> Anup Shah, "War on Terror". *Global Issues*. Global Issues, 24. Sept. 2011. Web. 20. April 2013. <http://www.globalissues.org/issue/245/war-on-terror#ResultingWaronTerror>

<sup>18</sup> White House, Web

As stated before, both of these movies are controversial but for different reasons. *JFK* is about the assassination of John F. Kennedy but it is based on two books, one by Jim Garrison called *On the Trail of the Assassins*, and the other by Jim Marrs called *Crossfire: The Plot That Killed Kennedy*.<sup>19</sup> By reading the titles of the two books you can gather that the movie focuses on the controversy and the conspiracy theories around Kennedy's assassination. To this day nobody is or can be sure of who killed Kennedy and to many this film was only stirring up uncomfortable feelings from the past. It fuelled discussions of conspiracy theories concerning a cover-up of the real events. The information that is put forth in the movie incriminates the CIA, the FBI, the then Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson and even the whole of the military. Understandably, many people were outraged and criticized the credibility of the facts put forth in the movie and many critics voiced their displeasure even before the movie was released and while Stone was still filming. Since this is seen from Jim Garrison's perspective, a man who was convinced that the government covered up key pieces of information and investigators intentionally botched the investigation, this seemed to bother many journalists to an extent. Only days after filming began, *Chicago Tribune* columnist Jon Margolis wrote that the film would be "an insult to intelligence"<sup>20</sup> and George Lardner of the *Washington Post* wrote a seven-column long condemnation of Stone's movie and Garrison's belief.<sup>21</sup> The other film, *Death of a President*, is considered controversial for a different reason. The main reason is that it is about the fictional murder of a real president. Many people were shocked because of this, questioning why anyone would make such a movie other than for propaganda. A White House spokesperson, Emily Lawrimore denied commenting on the film saying "it doesn't dignify a response"<sup>22</sup> and the then Senator Hillary Clinton was outraged and said "That anyone would even attempt to profit on such a horrible scenario makes me sick."<sup>23</sup> Because of this, *Death of a President* is a rather unique film as there are only a few films which could be

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<sup>19</sup> IMBd, "JFK". *IMBd.com*. Amazon.com Company, 20. Dec. 1991. Web. 15. March.

[http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0102138/fullcredits?ref\\_=tt\\_ov\\_wr#writers](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0102138/fullcredits?ref_=tt_ov_wr#writers)

<sup>20</sup> Carl Oglesby, "Who Killed JFK? The Media Whitewash." *Lies of Our Times*, Sept. 1991. Web. 18 Jan. 2012. <http://www.ratical.org/ratville/JFK/JFKloot.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Oglesby, Web.

<sup>22</sup> Kevin Sullivan, "Bush 'Assassination' Film Makes Waves Across the Pond". *The Washington Post*, 2 Sept. 2006. Web. 18 Jan. 2012 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/09/01/AR2006090100858.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Dwight R. Worley, "Sen. Hillary Clinton blasts Bush assassination film". *The Journal News*. Gannet Co. Inc, 16 Sept 2006. Web. 18 Jan 2012 <http://web.archive.org/web/20061023003633/http://www.lohud.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20060916/UPDATE/609160394>.

considered as similar to it, i.e. in depicting the events of the murder of a real person who was not really murdered. Controversial or not, these films both have great pace and story-telling and perhaps raise more questions than answers and that is something a good film does. Let the viewer keep thinking about the film long after the end credits roll. But how do they become that controversial?

## **The Directors**

Oliver Stone is known for making controversial movies like *Platoon* which show the horrific details of the Vietnam War, in which he actually fought himself. *JFK* is certainly his most recognized and controversial film and one of his more recent films, *W.* which incidentally focuses on another U.S. President, George W. Bush, was also considered controversial. Bush is portrayed as many people pictured him, a weird, absent-minded buffoon. He focused on Bush's early years and how he handled the presidency in his time in office. But *JFK* is considered Stone's masterpiece.

Oliver Stone immediately showed interest in making a movie based on Garrison's book after he read it.<sup>24</sup> It is apparent that the material caught his eye as this is one of the most famous conspiracy theories in the world. Stone does not necessarily believe the conspiracy of Kennedy's murder but the material is controversial and interesting enough that it would make a good film, a film that would potentially shock some audiences, which is what Stone does best. This is why one has to keep an open mind and stay critical when watching *JFK*. Stone took many liberties with some aspects of the case and much of the evidence stated as fact in the movie is not entirely accurate and some is known to be false. The writer and director of *Death of a President*, Gabriel Range, is more of an unknown in the world wide film industry. He is British and has made several films for British television, including other "what-if" scenarios. Range did not make this movie because he hates Bush and wants to criticize his work like many would think. Range only wants to show what he thinks would or could happen if somebody shot the President of the United States in this day and age, especially someone as unpopular as George Bush was when he was president.

## **Reception**

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<sup>24</sup> IMBd, "Trivia". *IMBd.com*. Amazon.com Company, 20. Dec. 1991. Web. 20.February 2013. [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0102138/trivia?ref\\_=tt\\_trv\\_trv](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0102138/trivia?ref_=tt_trv_trv)

Many people question the reasons for making these two films. For instance, a lot of people wondered why Oliver Stone would make a movie about such a horrific and sad event in American history. Was he only making it because he was so intrigued by the material or did he want to raise awareness about all the conspiracy theories concerning Kennedy's assassination? Many severely criticized this movie, movie critics and political figures alike, accusing Oliver Stone of bending the truth to make the assassination look like a conspiracy in the hopes of making a controversial, and therefore a successful movie. There does not seem to be a critic that says this movie is average in any way. Either it is a great film, providing plausible answers to questions that have been unanswered for too long, or it is pure rubbish, devoid of any truth. Jack Valenti, the president of the Motion Picture Association of America at the time, was outraged by the film, calling it a "hoax", a "smear" and "pure fiction" and even compared it to Nazi propaganda films.<sup>25</sup> Roger Ebert, a man who was well respected in the film industry for his film reviews, gave this film a very positive review, as he focused more on the filmmaking and how important it is in terms of cinematography and use of music. He is not as caught up in the conspiracy aspect of the film, instead he says that the film's achievement is that "it tries to marshal the anger which ever since 1963 has been gnawing away on some dark shelf of the national psyche."<sup>26</sup> The film is simply epic. With great film editing, for which the film was awarded the Academy Award, the movie keeps you alert and interested the whole 188 minutes of the running time. Stone creates the mystique behind the assassination brilliantly and keeps you on the edge of your seat. Positive reviews tell the truth about what a great job Oliver Stone does with his source material and his skills as a director and screenplay writer are undoubtedly excellent. Stone manages to take an enormous amount of information and turn it into a film that the viewer both understands and enjoys. The negative reviews focus too much on how Stone takes liberties with what he calls facts and condemn his movie only because the critics feel that Garrison's account of the events to be untruthful. However, they cannot seem to say anything bad about the filmmaking, acting, the script or the direction. The fact is that this film is one of the great cinematographic triumphs in recent years. Ebert said that film students will study this

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<sup>25</sup> Bernard Weinraub, "Valenti Calls 'J.F.K.' 'Hoax' and 'Smear'". *The New York Times*. The New York Times Company, 2 April 1992. Web. 14 Jan. 2012 <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/04/02/movies/valenti-calls-jfk-hoax-and-smear.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.

<sup>26</sup> Roger Ebert, "JFK." *Chicago Sun-Times*. Sun-Times Media, 20 Dec. 1991. Web. 16 Jan. 2012. <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/jfk-1991>.

movie for years to come.<sup>27</sup> This is one of the big differences between *JFK* and *Death of a President*.

Like Stone, Gabriel Range was heavily criticized for his film. People felt uneasy watching such a real depiction of somebody who existed in the real world, being assassinated and watching a “documentary” about it. Even though George Bush was not exactly the most popular of presidents, not all audiences appreciated it and many thought it was in really bad taste. Although there were many who hated Bush for his political views, it did not mean they wanted to see him die and not everybody who liked the movie hated Bush. Range even received death threats when he announced he was making a film about Bush’s assassination. Range said that that were people who jumped to conclusions and did not understand why he was making the film. It was not supposed to be anti-American or smear Bush in any way. He only wanted to make a movie about how the world would react if something like this happened.<sup>28</sup> Similar to *JFK*, *Death of a President* had good reviews and bad but this time the bad reviews outweighed the good ones. Peter Dale, head of More4 television channel, said it was a disturbing film but denied it being anti-Bush, saying “it’s a fairly attention-grabbing premise, but behind that is a serious and thought-provoking film”.<sup>29</sup> However, some critics do not like the movie itself, saying it is rather boring and stale, very much unlike what critics said about *JFK*, and the fact that it is controversial is not enough for a good movie. As film critic, James Berardinelli, puts it “a mediocre movie is a mediocre movie”.<sup>30</sup> However, the films have more things in common than only being controversial.

## Similarities in the Films

Both movies are about presidents that were under a great deal of scrutiny from the public or their fellow government officials some years prior to their murders. Only two years before his assassination, John F. Kennedy was held responsible for a botched

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<sup>27</sup> Ebert, Web.

<sup>28</sup> Fred Topel, “Interview with Writer/Director Gabriel Range”. *Hollywood Movies*. About.com, no date. Web. 15. March 2013. <http://movies.about.com/od/directorinterviews/a/deathgr110106.htm>

<sup>29</sup> Sullivan, Web

<sup>30</sup> James Berardinelli. “Death of a President” *Reelviews.net*. no date, 2006. Web. 18 Jan. 2012. [http://www.reelviews.net/movies/d/death\\_president.html](http://www.reelviews.net/movies/d/death_president.html)



operation to overthrow the government of the communist Fidel Castro in Cuba. Not only that but Kennedy was said to want to give up the “space race” to Nikita Khrushchev, the leader of the Soviet Union, in exchange for peace between the two opposing nations in the Cold War. That would mean that the United States involvement in the Vietnam War would greatly diminish. The film shows this as a bad decision as it seems to fuel the rumour that Kennedy is a Communist sympathizer, which does not sit well with the public or his own government. That is one of the main reasons why conspiracy theorists, and Jim Garrison, think that the U.S. government had something to do with Kennedy’s assassination. Getting rid of Kennedy would further insure American intervention in the Vietnam War which made army officials very satisfied. Stone’s film states that fighting a war will help a lot if your government needs money. The army needs supplies and weapons, they buy from large manufacturers owned by powerful men who make a lot of money and strengthen the economy, and everybody considered important are content. This brings us to George W. Bush. Roughly eight months after he was sworn in as The President of the United States, 9/11 happened. George W. Bush was the first U.S. President to experience a highly organized terrorist attack, involving a foreign terrorist cell, on U.S. soil. This resulted in the controversial Iraq war, one of the most controversial in history and the conflict is still present in the country where American soldiers fight against revolts and guerrilla warfare. Lives were lost every week, civilians and soldiers alike, and there did not seem to be any logical reason for this war other than Bush not wanting Hussein to be a president of his own country. Every day and every year Bush’s popularity started to fade and anti-war protests became more and more common. It is at this point in time that we see the assassination of George W. Bush in 2007. After waging a questionable war and a bad recession, somebody was fed up, and successfully murdered the U.S. president. Although it was not exactly the same, the killing does share some similarities with the Kennedy assassination.

## **Assassination**

John F. Kennedy was killed with a long range rifle but how many shots were fired is not clear even to this day. Jim Garrison insists that there were at least six shots fired by

three men; however, the Warren Commission stated that there were only three shots fired by one man, Lee Harvey Oswald. But one thing is true: the fatal shot came from a rifle and hit Kennedy straight in the head, splitting it almost open, killing him instantly. Bush was also (fictionally) killed with a rifle, hitting him in the chest and he died eventually from his wounds in the hospital. Let us start with the similarities. As stated before, they were both killed with long-range weapons. However, Kennedy's assassination is more shrouded in mystery, including how many shooters there were. Kennedy was exposed when he was shot, as a passenger in a topless car driving around 11 miles per hour. Kennedy was not the only one hit by a bullet as the governor of Texas, who was riding in the seat in front of Kennedy, was shot as well. He survived in spite of sustaining critical injuries. Bush however was the only one hit by the bullets, even though he was surrounded by crowds and his bodyguards from the Secret Service towered around him. After he is shot, Bush is rushed to the nearest hospital and undergoes surgery while he is still alive but in critical condition. He dies during the night on the operating table. In both of the movies we get both sides of the emotional scale. In *JFK* we see Kevin Costner's character Jim Garrison watching the news of the shooting on television at a bar. When the news anchor announces that Kennedy is dead most people are shocked, outraged and even cry for their fallen president. We get to see actors and real footage of people sobbing when they hear the news. African Americans are especially shocked, as Kennedy did much to help their campaign for equal rights in the United States. However in the bar where Jim Garrison sits there are some men happy with the news, saying that he deserved it and the shooter should be given a medal. But mostly we feel that he was loved by most of his countrymen and the day he died was a sad day in America.

In *Death of a President* it is a little bit different. We see interviews with some of Bush's employees and they are devastated by the news, mainly because they knew him personally and worked closely with him. We do not see much of the public's reaction to his death but we get the feeling that people are not that crushed over the news. We see a shot of a group of protesters, demonstrating against the Iraq war, cheering when they hear the news that Bush has been shot. In *Death of a President* we get the feeling that Americans did not like Bush very much, which is probably accurate when you think about it. His popularity faded away and he became more and more detested. To be honest, unless you are a hardcore Republican, you would not miss George Bush. That is exactly the opposite with *JFK*. We do get the sense of a great loss and despair, with sad

faces to be seen almost everywhere. Perhaps dissimilar reactions to their deaths but in both instances people want answers and they want them fast.

After the Kennedy assassination, an investigation was conducted and the conclusion was revealed in a report called the Warren Commission, which among other things concluded that there was a single shooter, Lee Harvey Oswald who was responsible and Oswald's killer, Jack Ruby, acted alone. The whole of *JFK* follows Jim Garrison's investigation into the assassination, several years after the Warren Commission was made public. Garrison, as a district attorney, is baffled by the lack of professionalism and scrutiny and a matter as important as finding the people responsible for the murder of the president is treated much more lightly than it should be. Important data and witness reports are missing and even witnesses themselves start dropping dead. Therefore Garrison's investigation is not off to a good start. Garrison, with his team of investigators, slowly builds a case against a man called Clay Shaw, who Garrison believed was involved in the conspiracy of killing Kennedy. The biggest problem with finding Kennedy's assassin is of course the fact that Lee Harvey Oswald, who was the police's main suspect, was murdered only days after he was arrested, on live television no less. For that reason no trial was held, no evidence shown and most importantly Oswald never got the chance to prove his innocence in a court of law. He always denied shooting anyone and said that he was a patsy, that he was being used to take the blame for the killing. Two days after his arrest, he was shot and killed by Jack Ruby, a bar owner. It seemed that it was an open and shut case, Oswald was found in a building close by after suspected of shooting a police officer. They found a rifle from Oswald's possession in a building overlooking the street where Kennedy was killed.

*Death of a President* does something similar: the authorities have suspects in custody minutes after the shooting. However, they soon find out that none of the people in custody are guilty. We follow a quite extensive and sensible investigation conducted by the FBI. The investigation is flawed by their xenophobia as they focus their investigation on people of Middle-Eastern descent. Investigators quickly jump to the conclusion that the assassin is of Middle-Eastern origins as Bush is passionately hated in the Middle East, but more importantly, this would help justify the war USA is waging in the Middle East. So for the last half of the movie we see the FBI frantically building a case against a Syrian man who was seen in the building that the shooter was in when the president was assassinated. His fingerprint was also found in the room where the shooter was and there was gunshot residue on his jacket. Incriminating

evidence but not conclusive. But the investigators were so obsessed with convicting this man, called Jamal Abu Zikri, mostly because he fitted the profile of a terrorist from the Middle East. Because of this, they mostly ignore the emergence of new evidence that implicates an American in the killing. Not only a regular American citizen, but a major in the military who fought during Desert Storm. This soldier, named Al Claybon, commits suicide shortly after the assassination and leaves a suicide note addressed to last surviving son, Casey. Both of Al's sons joined the army and fought in the Iraq War but his elder son, David, was killed in action. In his suicide note Al says that he cannot forgive George Bush for making his sons and others fight an immoral war and says that it is Bush's fault that David is dead. He never actually says he was the one to kill Bush but it is strongly implied. In spite of this, Al is never fully investigated and the case receives little attention from investigators and the media. Near the end of the film Casey Claybon finds amongst his father's things a copy of Bush's top secret itinerary, which outlays all of the President's movements the day he was killed. This evidence further stipulates Al's involvement in Bush's death and investigators finally take a closer look at Al. However Abu Zikri has already been convicted of the murder of Bush. As the movie ends it states that Abu Zikri has not been granted leave to appeal and remains on death row for the murder of George Bush.

Therefore both films have two different conclusions. One conclusion is the one made by the investigators, and what they decide is the final answer after the investigation. In both films these answers are portrayed as the wrong ones. In Bush's case it is Abu Zikri who is the killer and is convicted of the crime and in Kennedy's case it was Lee Harvey Oswald who killed Kennedy. The other conclusion of the films is the ambiguous one, something the viewers can decide for themselves. In Bush's case it is the racial profiling that taints the FBI's view on the matter and when it is implied that Al Claybon killed the president not Abu Zikri. In Kennedy's case it is implied that the government was behind the whole thing and used Oswald as a patsy. In other words, both films have a convenient and inconvenient conclusion. And if the president is killed, someone has to take over the country now that the former president is dead. That would be the vice president.

## **Role of the Vice Presidents**

In both films the vice presidents make drastic decisions that the public does not agree with. In *JFK* it is even implied that Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson had something to do with the government conspiracy, but that is Oliver Stone exploiting his liberties as an artist and it as that has never been proven. He is shown saying that if the army officials can get rid of Kennedy they would get their war, that being the Vietnam War. Bush's Vice President Dick Cheney uses his position for his own benefit, even pushing the FBI to confine Abu Zikri on unsubstantial evidence most likely because he is Syrian. He uses the fact that the prime suspect is Syrian to enforce his own agenda to try to get rid of Bashar al-Assad, the President of Syria. However, the United States government was not convinced and did not authorize any retaliation on the Syrian people so Cheney started focusing on what he could do in the USA. Congress, under the leadership of Cheney, approved a series of amendments to the existing Patriot Act, dubbed Patriot III, that gave authorities unparalleled powers in terms of surveillance and detention in USA. Cheney's counterpart in *JFK*, Lyndon B. Johnson did many good things after becoming the president but there was one big problem. His decision to intervene in the Vietnam War only made a bad thing worse. It would ultimately end with a disgraceful exit for the Americans with thousands dead and countless wounded soldiers, not to mention their allies' soldiers and civilians.

There seems to be a pattern emerging and you do not have to watch the films to see it. When times are tough and there is a recession, which both Kennedy and Bush faced in their days in office, the best course of action always seems to be war which is gone into detail in *JFK*. Money is pumped into weapons factories and machine manufacturers which in turn strengthen the corporations and the owners of these corporations use that money to support the government. In the days of the Vietnam War however, the general public was more aware of what such a big conflict can do, especially since the media fed them information every day from the battlefield, showing just how gruesome war is. This was the first time people at home received uncorrupted information and could actually see what was happening to their soldiers in the field of battle. People are more informed in this day and age so anti-war protests are now more common than ever, exactly what we see in *Death of a President*. This fact played a major role in both murders. It is ironic to see that whatever the President decides he cannot please both the Congress and the public. John F. Kennedy thought about reducing America's involvement in the Vietnam War and Congress gets rid of him (allegedly). George Bush is determined to keep waging war in Iraq and a member of the

public gets rid of him (allegedly as well). Whatever the President does he will always be unpopular in somebody's eyes.

## **Conclusion**

Violence in media is nothing new and as long as there will be controversial world leaders there will always be controversial films revolving around them. These films are about what happens when the President of the United States is killed by an assassin. Questions are raised that need answering: who is responsible and why did he or she do it? There is mayhem, people are confused, some cry for the loss of a great leader but others celebrate the fact that somebody finally removed him. Officials need to make fast decisions to show that they are still in control. Many things affect the investigation, be it Congress, new presidents, xenophobia or something else entirely. Most importantly, the conclusion of the investigation has to please and possibly benefit the most powerful people in the country, the new president and his followers. Filmmakers take a great risk by making these films about presidential murder. They can easily become outcasts from the movie world if seen as being exploitative and downright vicious. The public questions their motives and criticize how they portray the presidents, who are real. Filmmakers glorify them too much or play fast and loose with facts and twist them to make their film more interesting. Most people are not that stupid, they can see through exploitative and didactic films so it is important to keep in mind that in making these films, they have to be intelligent, sophisticated and above all entertaining.

These films show that being the President of the United States is being at a constant risk of being killed by those insane enough to murder another human being, because he or she disagrees with the president's decisions. The President will always be hated somewhere in the world and their influence, be they Taliban or communist, runs deep and they have friends all over the world, including America. To this day the U.S. president risks his life every time he decides to take a walk or give a speech. This is common knowledge today.

Films about presidential assassinations will always be controversial, be they true stories or fictional assassinations of real presidents. People will be outraged and

fascinated at the same time. Oliver Stone's *JFK* proved that films have the power to change views on how people see things, in this instance the conclusion to the investigation of the Kennedy assassination. The film made people really question what was true and what was false. Gabriel Range's *Death of a President* opened up a can of worms, pushing the boundaries of mainstream cinema. He was brave enough to make a film that nobody expected to be made. It is admirable and we could always use more people like him. These films did more than reveal something to people and then fade away in memory. People that saw these films will always remember them as a film that sparked some sort of an emotion, be it anger or satisfaction or a mixture of both, and they will reference them for years to come.

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