

FILM REVIEW: "EXECUTIVE ACTION"

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The tenth anniversary of President John F. Kennedy's assassination has sparked a renewed interest in the controversial circumstances surrounding that event. Joining the ranks of the numerous books and articles is a new film, "Executive Action," written by Dalton Trumbo, Mark Lane, and Donald Freed. As one might expect, the film claims that Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone in killing the President. However, the film does not stop there. It also presents the hypothesis that Oswald was framed, and that the assassination was actually arranged by three wealthy right-wing conspirators. The makers of the film, it must be noted, have made the following disclaimer: "This does not purport to be a definite document on the assassination of JFK." Nevertheless, it is plausibly presented and is bound to have an impact on public opinion. The purpose of this review is to consider whether or not such a conspiracy might have existed.

"Executive Action" depicts the conspirators as intelligent, rational, and coldly calculating. The film asserts that these right-wingers had a number of logical reasons for plotting Kennedy's murder:

- (1) He was "encouraging" a black revolution;
- (2) He was planning a nuclear test ban treaty;
- (3) He was invoking anti-trust regulations to prevent mergers;
- (4) He was going to pull American troops out of Vietnam by Christmas, 1965;
- (5) He, along with his two brothers, was beginning a twenty-four year dynasty of Kennedys in the White House.

certainty. This, in fact, is the basic premise on which the right-wing conspiracy theory rests. The facts of the matter are quite different. Knowledgeable Republicans were aware, in 1963, that Barry Goldwater was far out in front in that party's contest for the Presidential nomination. Goldwater appealed to all right-wing groups, including the type of people depicted in "Executive Action." Kennedy's re-election, on the other hand, was by no means a sure thing. A primary reason for his trip to Dallas was to improve his weak position in that important state. Certainly, as the incumbent, his chances of re-election were excellent. But the essential point, which the film neglects, is that as of 1963 there was a clear possibility that the Republicans might win in 1964. Under these circumstances, it would have been more logical for right-wing conspirators to wait until after the 1964 election to consider the "necessity" of assassination. The contention that Kennedy would have withdrawn the Vietnam forces is of dubious validity. Kenneth O'Donnell, in his book Johnny We Hardly Knew Ye, claims that Kennedy stated in 1963 that he would withdraw the troops after the 1964 election. If this is true, then we must wonder why O'Donnell waited nine years to make the revelation. For the sake of argument, at least, let us assume that Kennedy was planning to withdraw from Vietnam by the end of 1965. If Goldwater were elected, there would still remain considerable time to reverse the withdrawal policy. If Kennedy were re-elected, it would leave any would-be conspirators more than a year to plan and carry out an assassination. Given the prospect of a Goldwater candidacy, it is hard to believe that intelligent, rational right-wingers would not have been willing to give the electoral process a chance.

It must also be remembered that the left wing had ample reason

to be dissatisfied with Kennedy. The Bay of Pigs, the Cuban Missile crisis, and the general anti-communist tone of the Kennedy Administration angered many on the radical left. Garry Wills, in Nixon Agonistes, makes a strong case for regarding Kennedy as the most extreme Cold Warrior the Presidency had yet seen. The makers of "Executive Action" could easily have inserted left-wing conspirators and left the rest of the film intact. The result would be just as unconvincing.

This is not to say that the Warren Commission Report is the final word on the assassination. In fact, there is strong circumstantial evidence to indicate that Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone. He was, by most accounts, a poor marksman, and the type of rifle he owned was notoriously unreliable. The failure of the Warren Commission to publish the autopsy photographs encourages speculation that more than one assassin was involved. It is even likely that a conspiracy of some sort did exist. But a conspiracy, remember, requires only two persons working together. It may have been nothing more complicated than Oswald and an accomplice, shooting from two different locations. To suggest that it was right-wing businessmen, or Communists, or whatever, is to engage in the wildest speculation. The fact of the matter is that any (or none) of the existing theories could be true. Perhaps the truth will someday be known. It is more likely, however, that the motivations behind President Kennedy's assassination will never be known. "Executive Action" is, in many ways, a provocative film. It is not history.