

IT'S A CONSPIRACY!

As a Cautionary Remembrance of the JFK Assassination—A Survey of Films With A Paranoid Edge | Dan Akira Nishimura with Don Malcolm

The only culture to enlist the imagination and change the character of Americans was the one we had been given by the movies...

No movie star had the mind, courage or force to be national leader... So the President nominated himself. He would fill the void. He would be the movie star come to life as President.

—Norman Mailer

President John F. Kennedy was a movie fan. Ironically, one of his favorites was *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), directed by John Frankenheimer. With the president's permission, Frankenheimer was able to shoot scenes from *Seven Days in May* (1964) at the White House. Due to the events of November 1963, both films seem prescient. Was Lee Harvey Oswald a sleeper agent, a "Manchurian candidate?" Or was it a military coup as in the latter film? Or both?

Over the years, many films have dealt with political conspiracies—some realistically, others using allegory or fantasy. Here's our Top 40 by year of release (for an extended discussion of the epic Dallas-to-extraterrestrial conspiracy hatched on the legendary 1990s television series *The X-Files*, the reader is directed to Ray Pratt's excellent book, *Projecting Paranoia*).

1. The Wizard of Oz (1939)

Seeking disaster relief after a tornado, Kansas state representative Dorothy (Judy Garland) flies to Oz. Finding the capitol in gridlock, she caucuses with fellow reps (Bert Lahr, Ray Bolger, Jack Haley) who turn out to lack courage, brains, and heart. Suspecting a conspiracy and realizing it's



up to her to uncover it, Dorothy pulls back the curtain on the autocratic chief executive (Frank Morgan). She discovers that the man who made a lot of promises at election time is not as all-powerful as everyone thought.

2. It's a Wonderful Life (1946)

After a lifetime of sacrifice and hard work, George Bailey (James Stewart) is faced with having his family savings-and-loan going un-

der. As it snows, he walks the streets of the town that will be forever changed. The banker Mr. Potter (Lionel Barrymore), a scrooge-like character, practically owns Bedford Falls. As he prepares to reshape it in his own image, Potter doesn't act alone. There's also a board of directors with identities shielded from the public (think MPAA). Who are these people? And what's so wonderful about *them*?

3. Ace in the Hole (1951)

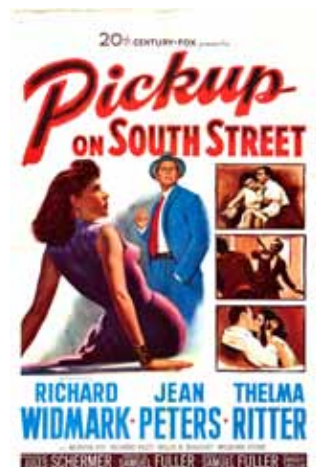
A former big city reporter lands a job for an Albuquerque daily. Chuck Tatum (Kirk Douglas) is looking for a ticket back to "the Apple." He thinks he's found it when Leo Mimosa (Richard Benedict) is trapped in a cave collapse. With the collusion of the corrupt sheriff (Ray Teal), the crisis is extended



and becomes a circus, the "big carnival" of the film's alternate title. New York editors bite at the story, giving Tatum an exclusive. Locally, his editor Jacob Q. Boot (Porter Hall), who'd hired him with misgivings, suspects something but can't prove it. Mimosa's wife (Jan Sterling) succumbs to Tatum but also contributes to his downfall. Billy Wilder's film is an indictment of the media's drive to make news (and money) rather just reporting on it.

4. Pickup on South Street (1953)

Samuel Fuller's fast-paced noir stars Richard Widmark, Jean Peters, and Thelma Ritter. Widmark plays Skip McCoy, a pickpocket who accidentally lifts a coded message being transported by an attractive brunette (Peters). This may be the best of the 1950s anti-Communist pictures. It generally avoids preachiness and ex-newspaperman Fuller's dialogue rolls off the tongues of the actors. Ritter is poignant as Moe, the doomed grifter who puts herself in harm's way against a Commie spy ring due to a simple, but elemental, thought: "I don't like 'em!!"



5. Bad Day at Black Rock (1954)

In an essay about the widescreen theatrical experience, Colin Root writes of the opening scene of this modern day Western: “Spencer Tracy is swallowed by the open space that surrounds him... We primarily notice the negative space: the blue sky, the hills, and the endless train tracks and fences.” When John J. Macreedy (Tracy) arrives in the desert town of Black Rock, he mentions to residents that he’s looking for a Japanese-American who lived nearby. Their reaction tells him something is wrong. Robert Ryan’s Reno Smith, ringleader of the local coverup, is as mean a bigot as one can imagine. He doesn’t frighten the hand-capped Macreedy, who continues his fight to learn the truth.



6. The Wrong Man (1956)

Manny Balestero (Henry Fonda) is a jazz musician charged with bank robbery. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock, this is mistaken identity, not a frame-up. And the stakes are lower than if it were a murder case. Still, try telling that to poor Manny who gets caught up in “the system.” As we saw with Oswald, once the authorities get it in their head that someone is guilty, all clues seem to lead back to him. The “wrong man” motif exists in many manifestations of noir, not just the government conspiracy sub-genre. Henry Fonda gives an opaque performance and has a deer-in-the-headlights expression for most of its running time.



7. The Man Who Knew Too Much (1956)

Hitchcock revisits his 1934 British thriller with good results. The exotic locations take full advantage of Technicolor and wide screen VistaVision. The assassination plot gets the story moving. Will the innocent couple who stumble onto it prevail in the end? With stars James Stewart and Doris Day, one would hope so...

8. Vertigo (1958)

Not a commercial success at the time, *Vertigo* is now considered Hitchcock’s masterpiece. John “Scottie” Ferguson (James Stewart) is a former detective who suffers from acrophobia. At an inquest in a California coastal town, (a Chappaquiddick hearing before its time), he stands accused of negligence in the death of Madeleine Elster, the wife of his college chum, Gavin (Tom Helmore). What



Scottie doesn’t realize is that the woman who perished was switched prior to her fall from the church bell tower. Scottie is the proverbial “fall guy,” inadvertently aiding in the “suicide,” his inaction caused by “vertigo.” Paralyzed with fear, he forgot Lesson #1 in the detective manual and left without checking the body. Judy Barton (Kim Novak) was the “honeytrap,” Gavin’s accomplice in his wife’s murder. The coroner (Henry Jones) who leads the inquest exonerates Scottie but not-so-subtly blames him. The cover-up is complete.

9. Touch of Evil (1958)

While it really isn’t the “last film noir” as often claimed, Orson Welles (in a glorious but ill-fated Hollywood comeback) takes the “bad cop” sub-genre to its ultimate extreme with this luridly flamboyant tale of corruption and dynamite. Donning a “fat suit” in his quest to portray outsized evil, Welles turns Hank Quinlan into the biggest conspirator in film history. Charlton Heston, who lobbied for Welles to direct the film, plays his harried Mexican law enforcement counterpart Miguel Vargas, who must go against Quinlan’s legendary police record to expose his systematic corruption of justice. He soon finds out that Quinlan has a multitude of “dirty tricks” up his sleeve, many of which get played on Vargas’ blonde, buxom wife (Janet Leigh).



10. The Manchurian Candidate (1962)

Raymond Shaw (Laurence Harvey) returns from captivity in Korea programmed to kill. Surviving P.O.W’s from his unit know the truth about what happened, but it’s only remembered when they dream. When one of them, Captain Marco (Frank Sinatra), begins his own investigation and starts getting close to the truth, he’s put on leave. Using the template of *The Wizard of Oz*, there’s a good witch (Janet Leigh), whom Marco meets on a train and a bad one (Angela Lansbury), the mother of Raymond Shaw. Adapted by George Axelrod from Richard Condon’s novel, it’s a movie that unites the McCarthy-era past with the 1962 cold-war present and a future full of assassinations.



11. The Trial (1962)

Adapted by Orson Welles from the novel by Franz Kafka, this is a spectacular visualization of Kafka’s supremely dark universe. Anthony Perkins is Josef K., a bank clerk arrested one morning at his rooming house. Although he’s not jailed, neither is he told the charges (in some ways, Oswald faced this predicament when he was arrested for but not charged with the killing of the President). In Josef’s case, the behavior of the authorities ranges from whimsical

to sadistic to murderous. He receives legal advice from the Advocate (Welles) who appears to be working for the other side.

Welles got caught up in his own Kafkaesque nightmare during the filming of the allegorical *Mr. Arkadin* (1955), a complex, bizarre variant of the cover-up/conspiracy tale. He told Peter Bogdanovich it was “the best popular story I ever thought up for a movie.” Making it, however, “was just anguish from beginning to end.” Three different versions of the film exist due to all the machinations.

12. Seven Days in May (1964)

While this tense tale of an attempted military coup mainly featured members of the boys’ club that comprise the Joint Chiefs (Kirk Douglas, Burt Lancaster) and Fredric March as the President, Ava Gardner is worth watching for as Eleanor Holbrook. Earlier, she had co-starred in Stanley Kramer’s *On the Beach* (1959), the story of an atomic attack that happens, ironically, in 1964. Rod Serling wrote the screenplay, backing away from the allegory a bit by making the President an older man than was the case in the novel. President Kennedy believed the message of *Seven Days in May* would be “a warning to the nation” and went on vacation to Hyanis Port to facilitate filming at the White House; unfortunately, the “warning” came too late.



13. Fail-Safe (1964)

In Sidney Lumet’s thriller, the nuclear attack about to be launched on Moscow is due to a technical glitch. As Agent Maxwell Smart (Don Adams) would say, “Sorry about that, Chief!” The Soviets are nice guys at heart so they agree to the President’s plan to maintain parity. Henry Fonda plays him as thoughtful and ethical with a Zen-like calm under pressure.

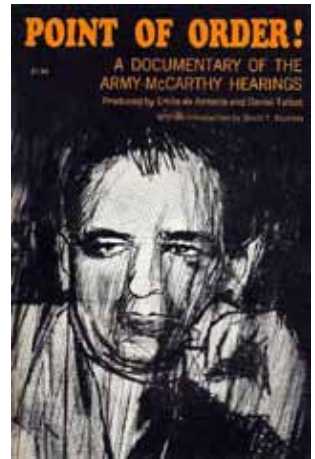
Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* was released the same year. Although it seems almost like a parody of *Fail-Safe*, any influence would have been indirect. With the Cuban Missile Crisis and Berlin, doomsday was in the air. *Strangelove’s* War Room set has been praised for its realism, but characters were exaggerated for comic effect (though not as much as one might think!).

In the made-for-TV *The Missiles of October* (1974), William Devane is President Kennedy and Martin Sheen is Robert F. Kennedy, on whose book the movie was based. The story was revisited in Roger Donaldson’s *Thirteen Days* (2000), adapted from the book *The Kennedy Tapes*, with Bruce Greenwood as JFK.



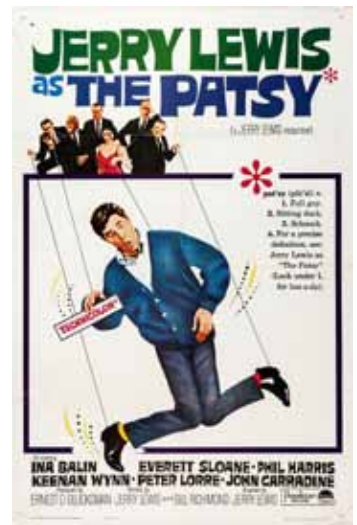
14. Point of Order (1964)

When Joseph McBride’s parents, both active Wisconsin Democrats, put a “Joe Must Go” bumper sticker on the family station wagon, the six-year-old namesake of Senator McCarthy panicked (temporarily). Director Emile de Antonio’s film is composed of footage from the 1954 Army-McCarthy hearings. Ostensibly to ferret out Communists, the hearings devolved into an embarrassing gay witch hunt (also see *Advise and Consent* [1962]) with McCarthy having a mental breakdown in front of the camera. Representing the Army was Joseph N. Welch, a born ham who later played the judge in *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959). And just what was Bobby Kennedy doing there, anyway?



15. The Patsy (1964)

The title was probably not taken from the Oswald remark. Then again, writer/director/star Jerry Lewis is known for his perverse sense of humor. Jerry plays Stanley, the “fall guy” in a scheme cooked up by a gang of television comedians. Like politics, show business is a tough racket. Everett Sloane (*Citizen Kane* [1941]), John Carradine (*Fallen Angel* [1945]) and Ina Balin (*Black Orchid* [1958]) co-star. George Raft, Hedda Hopper, and Rhonda Fleming appear as themselves. It was Peter Lorre’s final screen appearance. And what a way to go!



16. Blow-Up (1966)

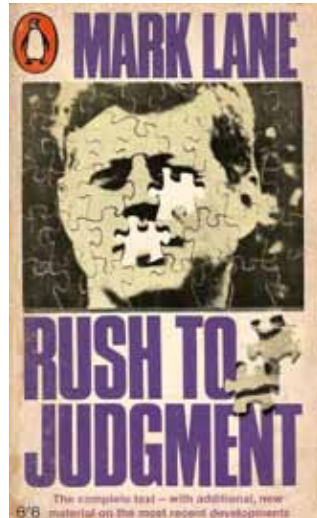
Why was Terence Stamp dropped two weeks before shooting began? A conspiracy, perhaps? David Hemmings took over the role and is note perfect as Thomas, a talented but arrogant London photographer (based loosely on swinging London picture snapper David Bailey). While snapping photos in the park, he encounters a mysterious woman (Vanessa Redgrave). Thomas keeps taking pictures. When he later enlarges (blows up) the photos in his darkroom, he notices something strange. The Zapruder film, initially seen as black-and-white still images, may not have been directly on the mind of writer/director



Michelangelo Antonioni. *Blow-Up* was the first of Antonioni's English language, rock and roll movies. The mod fashions and swinging London backdrop at first give the story a deceptively upbeat ambience. It's been said that the arrival of the Beatles gave Americans a much needed respite from the assassination. As this film shows, the darkness is always there beneath the surface.

17. Rush to Judgment (1967)

Mark Lane appears on camera extensively and says he wants the film to be "a brief for the defense of Oswald." He makes the point that even "dead Nazi war criminals" were given legal counsel at Nuremberg. Eyewitnesses are permitted to speak at length—including Acquilla Clemmons, who witnessed the Tippit killing by a "short, heavy" man. Some were never called before the Warren Commission or had their testimony altered. Others are shown backtracking on their original testimony and admit being influenced by the Warren Commission Report and the media. There's a clip of an interview with Detective James Leavelle saying, among other things, that he recognized Jack Ruby as he was advancing toward him, gun in hand. In another interview, a former Dallas patrolman tells Lane that a man resembling Ruby was given free access to the basement of City Hall. Directed by Emile de Antonio, it's barebones filmmaking, typical of documentaries of the era. The only instance of music on the soundtrack occurs when Lane interviews an African American entertainer who worked at the Carousel, Ruby's nightclub. The interview takes place as he sits at the piano playing moody jazz. It's a poignant, unexpected interlude.



18. Z (1969)

When Costa-Gavras premiered his thriller about the monetary crisis (*Capital* [2012]) in Los Angeles, middle-aged folks at the Q&A only wanted to talk about *Z*, a seminal film in their youth. With the American assassinations still too hot to handle, *Z*'s story of the cover-up of the murder of a Greek politician was distant enough but had tremendous resonance.



19. The Man (1972)

In 1972, Richard Nixon was re-elected by a landslide. The thought of a black man in the White House was, frankly, inconceivable. Rod Serling, no stranger to conspiracy theories, adapted Irving Wallace's novel about just such an impossible scenario. Through tragic circumstances, Douglass Dilman (James Earl Jones) an African-American member of the Senate becomes President. When members of the cabi-

net meet, it's as if Dilman isn't even there. They soon discover he has a mind of his own, posing a threat to their plans of reshaping the government.

Morgan Freeman, the narrator of *JFK: A President Betrayed* (2013), is President Beck in *Deep Impact* (1998). His oratory style may have influenced Dennis Haysbert as Senator, then President Palmer on *24* (2001-2007), whose administration nearly coincided with that of President Obama.

20. Executive Action (1973)

Directed by David Miller from a screenplay by Dalton Trumbo, the story came from Donald Freed and Mark Lane. Additional research was provided by W. Penn Jones, Jr. and others. With a brain trust like that, the movie must be good, right? Not quite: it suffers from the same problem that hampered *JFK* twenty years later, where characters are forced to convey too much information verbally. Liberals Burt Lancaster, Robert Ryan, and the formerly blacklisted Will Geer gamely espouse the far right, racist views of characters plotting President Kennedy's assassination. Still, a movie where less is explained in dialogue generally works better.

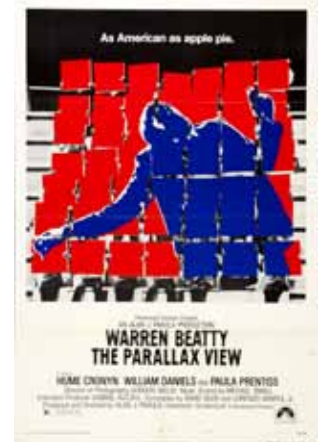


Fortunately, leads Ryan and Lancaster are convincing. Ryan's Robert Foster is a sly fox, bemused by the seemingly erratic behavior of Oswald: "The man's a genius. He'll be having the FBI watching the CIA and the CIA watching the Bureau. Before he's through nobody will know whose man he is." Taking no chances, a "double" is trained to impersonate their "patsy." Photo alteration does the rest.

Released in the same year, *Scorpio* has Lancaster as Cross, a veteran CIA assassin teamed with a French counterpart played by Alain Delon (*Le Samourai* [1967]) Delon is the title character. "We named you well," offers a fellow spook. "You have a penchant for intrigue, violence." I'm used to watching Delon with subtitles. It's an open question whether or not he can speak English, but he does look great.

21. The Parallax View (1974)

Not widely seen in its time despite starring Warren Beatty, it's one of the great films of the 1970s. Directed by Alan J. Pakula, the story begins with an assassination committed by two gunmen. One dies while being apprehended. The other escapes undetected. Without mentioning Kennedy directly, the audience knows exactly what's being referenced. The tone is dark and enigmatic with occasional humor. The tribunal seen making pronouncements about the case is quick to endorse a lone assassin theory and is an eerie but absurd send-up of the Warren Commission.



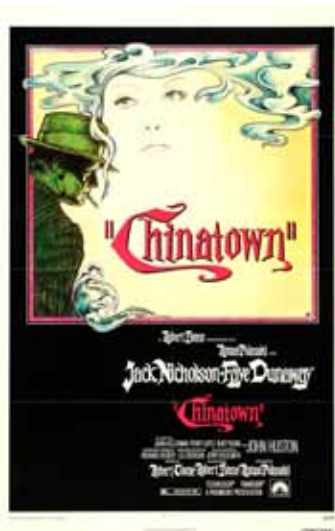
22. The Conversation (1974)

Harry Caul (Gene Hackman) is a surveillance expert guilt-ridden about an earlier case where innocent people were harmed. He doesn't want that to happen again. Secretly taping a "conversation," he believes that a murder is about to happen and tries to intervene. The film, directed by Francis Ford Coppola, is a warning about the intrusive society we were becoming due to technology. It's also notable for the innovative sound design by Walter Murch.



23. Chinatown (1974)

Noah Cross (John Huston) heads one of the wealthy families that control Los Angeles. A private detective named Jake Gittes (Jack Nicholson) discovers that Cross and his cronies are illegally diverting water. Water rights will determine property values and the growth of the city. At least in the movie, it's something important enough to kill for. Directed by Roman Polanski, the film beautifully renders late 1930's Los Angeles. Robert Towne's historically based screenplay evokes William Mulholland, who supervised the building of the Los Angeles aqueduct.



24. The Godfather, Part II (1974)

In Part I of the Francis Ford Coppola-directed epic, we saw how the Mafia co-existed with the authorities. It's 1958 and Michael now leads the Corleone family. Plots against him abound and older brother Fredo (John Cazale) commits the ultimate betrayal by taking sides against the family. Because of Fredo, Michael is nearly assassinated at his home in Nevada. He survives and moves to protect Corleone interests in Havana. It's a mob paradise, close enough to attract Americans eager to gamble, but far enough away from the Feds. We get a glimpse into the Cuba that the exiles, who considered Kennedy a traitor, wanted to reclaim.



25. All The President's Men (1976)

Played by Dustin Hoffman in the film, Carl Bernstein was last seen wearing a T-shirt that read: "I followed the money, too, and all I got was this lousy T-shirt." Bernstein's former partner, Bob Woodward, has enriched himself writing insider books. Their Watergate source, Deep Throat, was thought to be a composite character until former Associate FBI Director W. Mark Felt came forward in 2005. Deep Throat was reborn as the Cigarette Smoking Man (William B. Davis) on *The X-Files*, a character with his own take on the Kennedy assassination.



26. Blow Out (1981)

Inspired by the earlier *Blow-Up*, *Blow Out* stands on its own. Jack Terry (John Travolta) is a sound man. As in *Blow-Up*, something he records later turns out to have sinister implications and embroils him in—yes, a conspiracy.

27. Missing (1983)

Ed Horman (Jack Lemmon) is an American searching for his son (John Shea) in Chile following the September 11, 1973 military takeover. President Salvador Allende was assassinated and his supporters were disappearing. It's another disturbing political thriller from Costa-Gavras. Lemmon is wrenchingly brilliant as a man who believes in his country and everything he thought it stood for. The three-part *The Battle of Chile* (1975-1979), directed by Patricio Guzman, provides a deeper understanding of the U.S.-backed coup.

Also in 1983, *The Star Chamber*, directed by Peter Hyams and starring Michael Douglas, carried the idea of "activist judges" to a new extreme.

28. Flashpoint (1984)

Reviewer Jeffrey Leach writes: "The American Southwest is an environment of sand, cactus, heat, and more heat. It's the sort of place where some people still think they live in the Old West... It's also a place where secrets can hide under the sand for decades..." Logan (Kris Kristofferson) and Ernie (Treat Williams) are border patrol agents who diverge from their assigned duties and discover evidence with a possible link to the Kennedy assassination. Real border patrol agents generally have beer guts, but no matter.

Three years later, Kristofferson would star in the TV mini-series *Amerika* in which the United States is taken over by the Soviets (remember them?). Some Americans col-



laborate while others are sent to the gulags. It's a grim situation, but patriots find comfort in secret performances of Broadway's *The Fantasticks*, now banned as subversive. The song "Try to Remember (A Kind Of September)" becomes a raised-fist revolutionary anthem (when I recently told this to a nice lady in Times Square who was hawkking tickets to the show, she nearly died laughing).

29. *Malcolm X* (1992)

The assassination of Malcolm X is not usually mentioned in the same breath with that of the Kennedy brothers and Martin Luther King. He gets his due in Spike Lee's film, with Denzel Washington heading a strong cast. In the opening scene, a young woman supporter cradles Malcolm's head after he's shot. It's a gripping scene that strives for authenticity by casting an Asian actress to play Malcolm's real-life confidante, Yuri Kochiyama. The cinematography by Ernest R. Dickerson gives the film an epic quality: in a flashback, the night riders who set fire to the Little family home are seen riding away against a brilliant orange sun. When a New York police captain (Peter Boyle) says of Malcolm, "no one man should have that much power," what he's really saying is that "no black man should have that much power."



30. *Ruby* (1992)

Danny Aiello plays Jack Ruby, American's best-known murderer—but his characterization lacks the pronounced element of neurosis that Ruby exhibited in real life. The movie explores some theories involving Ruby's connection to the Cuban exile community. It's more about showcasing the girls of his strip club. Sheryl Ann Dujean, whose burlesque moniker was "Candy Cane," is played by *Twin Peaks* favorite Sherilyn Fenn. In real life, Jack Ruby stripper Karen Carlin (aka "Little Lynn") begged for help during a Secret Service interview on the night of the Oswald assassination. She was later killed in a Houston hotel. Another Ruby stripper, Betty Mooney MacDonald, may also have known too much and was found hanged in her jail cell following an arrest.



31. *JFK* (1991)

Thirty years after *Dallas*, Oliver Stone's *JFK* renewed speculation about what might have actually happened. Researchers were galvanized and Congress was pressured into reopening the investigation and releasing previously classified documents. While it's ambitious and does an admirable job with re-creations, it's also a deeply

flawed movie. Without a doubt, Kevin Costner is riveting as New Orleans' District Attorney Jim Garrison. Many of the supporting characters (Walter Matthau, et. al.), however, serve mainly as mouthpieces for the ideas put forth in Garrison's books.

As the aptly named David Ferrie, Joe Pesci is entertaining but cartoonish in a ridiculous wig. As Lee Harvey Oswald, Gary Oldman has the right physicality, but his foreign-sounding accent isn't quite right. John Candy fares better as the chubby, jive-talking Dean Andrews, a law school chum of Garrison who may know too much. Tommy Lee Jones is appropriately effete as Clay Shaw, the silver-haired money man who may have bankrolled the operation. Colonel X (Donald Sutherland) is yet another variation on *Deep Throat*. A frequent complaint about Stone is that he can't write female characters. Sissy Spacek has the thankless role of Garrison's long-suffering, nagging wife. "I think you care more about John Kennedy than your own family," she complains. Unlike her character in *Missing*, she at least knows where her husband is.



32. *Nixon* (1995)

Stone was up to his old tricks, but history didn't repeat itself. Not nearly as good as *JFK*, *Nixon* suffers from its casting. Anthony Hopkins' impersonation of Richard Nixon is more of a *Saturday Night Live* sketch than anything else. In real life, the doughy-faced Hopkins neither looks nor sounds anything like the deposed president, but it was too early for Frank Langella, who'd fill the bill admirably in *Frost/Nixon* (2012). Of course, if someone resembled Nixon they probably wouldn't go into show business in the first place. Rip Torn's Nixon in the TV movie *Blind Ambition* (1979), based on John Dean's book, is much more believable.



33. *Conspiracy Theory* (1997)

Directed by Richard Donner (*Lethal Weapon 1-4*), Mel Gibson is Jerry Fletcher, a cab driver obsessed with conspiracies. In the opening credit sequence, he's seen discussing his crackpot ideas while driving his fares around Manhattan. It's a comical sequence, but there are hints of mental illness. He's dismissed as a loveable kook by Justice Dept. lawyer Alice Sutton (Julia Roberts), who's improbably been meeting with him. He claims to have evidence that a satellite is programmed to kill the president. The current edition of his newsletter, called "Conspiracy Theory," features an article linking George H. W. Bush to Oliver Stone. His ideas are far-fetched, but a black ops unit led by a Dr. Jonas (Patrick Stewart) doesn't think so. From there, the story becomes increasingly more bizarre.

34. **Enemy of the State (1998)**

Will Smith stars as lawyer Robert Clayton Dean in director Tony Scott's thriller. Jon Voight plays an NSA bad guy named Reynolds. Like Voight, Gene Hackman is ideally cast as surveillance renegade Edward Lyle. He's Harry Caul all over again, hiding out in a secure bunker. Dean becomes a wanted man when he's passed a video that shows evidence of government-sanctioned murder. He loses his job, his apartment *and* his girlfriend (Regina King), before he strikes back. Along the way, there are ample demonstrations of what surveillance teams were capable of, even in the early 1990s. I saw this at a revival screening while news about NSA spying authorized by President Obama was breaking. To what extent is Obama, the inheritor of the imperial presidency, being "handled" by the NSA/CIA? He's backed off on torture, so far as we know, but since making his bones with the Bin Laden hit, is fully onboard with targeted assassinations. Perhaps Gene Hackman could bug the Oval Office to find out.



35. **Interview with the Assassin (2002)**

"You kill the most powerful man in the world, I'd say that makes *you* the most powerful, don't you think?" Ron Kobeleski (Dylan Haggerty) is a laid-off, thirty-something cameraman hoping to freelance. He arranges to film an interview with his neighbor across the street. From behind the camera, Ron asks, "So what's this crime you want to talk about?" Walter Ohlinger (Raymond J. Barry), age 62, doesn't like the less than respectful tone and says, "If you don't want to do this, I can ask a real reporter." After calming him down and agreeing to his terms of absolute confidentiality, Walter begins to tell his story. "I was in Dallas, November 22, 1963. That mean anything to you?"



A dead ringer for Hunter S. Thompson, the tightly-coiled former Marine is a terrifying presence. Suddenly, Walter doesn't seem like the crank Ron first suspected. Ron lacks experience as a reporter but begins his investigation by lab-testing the evidence that Walter, who doesn't have long to live, has kept hidden. The two of them then head out on a Texas odyssey. Director Neil Burger films it like an episode of *Cops* with lots of hand-held camera work.

36. **Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004)**

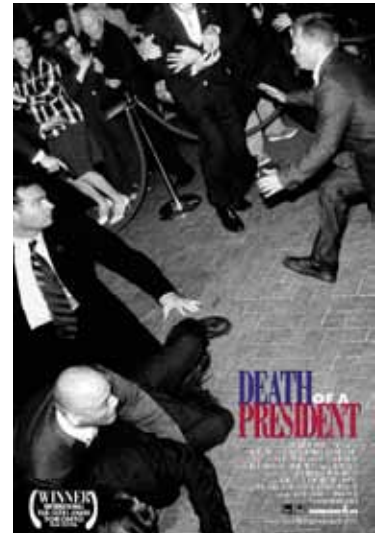
Michael Moore is both a galvanizing and a polarizing figure, but he's definitely an innovator: his documentaries have popularized the use of found footage with narration and authoritative talking heads, all as-

sembled into a slick package. Charges of hypocrisy and treason were hurled his way after the release of this film, but he has to be given credit for taking on George W. Bush when he still had strong support for what quickly became known as the "Baghdad quagmire." The scene of Bush reading to a class of school children while the Twin Towers were already smoldering would be funny, if it weren't so tragic. Was he dazed, or just confused? Had "they" failed to brief him on what was going to happen?



37. **Death of a President (2006)**

The man Joseph McBride refers to as "the wastrel son" who stole the 2000 election gets the ultimate comeuppance in this British mockumentary that had a brief art house run. Do I believe assassinations are an acceptable means to a political end? Of course not. But did I stand up and cheer when a fictionalized version of the worst president in my lifetime gets his? Unlike GWB, I cannot tell a lie.



38. **Vantage Point (2008)**

Directed by Peter Travers, the assassination of U.S. President Ashton (William Hurt) while visiting Spain is told from multiple points of view. In the opening segment, news director Rex Brooks (Sigourney Weaver) is chiding her ace on-camera reporter Angie Jones (Zoe Saldana) for injecting opinion. The correspondent pushes back. It seems like another day at the office until shots ring out. Forest Whitaker is Howard Lewis, an average Joe making a home movie of the event. His video becomes key evidence. Agent Thomas Barnes (Dennis Quaid) survived a previous assassination attempt (also see *In the Line of Fire* [1993]) and it's déjà vu all over again. *Vantage Point* maintains interest even when we know what's coming. It's the Alfred Hitchcock "ticking bomb" paradox. As the story develops, nothing is quite as we first thought.



39. Nothing But the Truth (2008)

Directed by Rod Lurie, this tense drama has a plot reminiscent of the Valerie Plame affair. A reporter (Kate Beckinsale) refuses to give up her source after identifying a CIA agent (Vera Farmiga). Freedom of the Press versus confidentiality and privacy are explored. Those issues come up again in the docudrama *Fair Game* (2010) with Naomi Watts as Valerie Plame and Sean Penn as her husband, Joseph C. Wilson.

As a CIA officer, the real-life Plame worked for President George H. W. Bush, a man for whom Wilson had nothing but praise. That was in stark contrast to what he said about the son and his administration. Reading behind the lines of Wilson's official biography, he very well could also have been involved in espionage. The family that spies together, stays together!



40. J. Edgar (2011)

Long-time FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, who pioneered fingerprint identification, has his prints all over the Kennedy assassination (figuratively if not literally). The film glosses over that point, but we do learn of Hoover's adversarial relationship with Attorney General Robert Kennedy (Jeffrey Donovan). Leonardo DiCaprio warms up for his turn as Jay Gatsby with an astringent portrayal of the ultimate G-man, who is humanized somewhat by a close friendship with his secretary Helen Gandy (Naomi Watts). The movie also deals frankly with Hoover's suppressed homosexuality and relationship with aide Clyde Tolson (Armie Hammer). Directed by Clint Eastwood and shot with a flickering burnish by Tom Stern, it's better than it's given credit for.



2013's *Parkland* and *JFK: A President Betrayed* are reviewed separately. Thanks to Professor Joseph McBride for his assistance. ■



Frank Sinatra, Laurence Harvey, and company in the pivotal brainwashing scene from *The Manchurian Candidate*