Alexander the Great and "J.F.K." by R. Faber

In human history there is one quirk which continues to baffle me: some great people die mysterious deaths. How comes it, I wonder, that people whose lives are subject to careful public scrutiny die in uncertain circumstances and so leave behind a host of conflicting reports, false allegations, and unanswered questions?

The recent release of Oliver Stone's film "J.F.K." reminded me of the phenomenon. John Fitzgerald Kennedy was a man in the centre of American attention. A popular leader and eloquent speaker, he appeared destined to alter American history. With the same zeal that characterises its fascination with the Kennedy clan today, the public observed the daily affairs of the family in the sixties. It was a heady time, and change was in the offing. John Kennedy stood at the forefront of political change when an assassin's bullet hit him. It was 1963, and many recall the moment when the president was shot.

Oliver Stone's film attents to recreate the events surrounding the death of John Kennedy. Many of the numerous questions which were posed in 1963 remain unanswered today. Even today the public remains confused by the conflicting reports of the motive and method of the killing of J.F.K. Indeed, it appears that another investigation into the shooting will be conducted, more than twenty years after the event. Though satisfied with the knowledge of Kennedy's life, the people feel themselves uninformed regarding his death. Whodunit?

John Kennedy is not the first personage whose death is shrouded in mystery. Throughout history many political, religious, and military leaders have died under curious conditions. And when their lives ceased, these people left behind a vacuum of power. What's more, the cause of their deaths - often sudden and unexpected deaths - became matter for slander, propaganda, and false allegations. In the ancient world this phenomenon occurred not a few times.

Consider Alexander the Great, for example. The ambitious son of Philip of Macedon was poised to conquer the known world when he died of causes on which the ancient historians differ. Indeed, the circumstances of Alexander's death continue to vex modern historians. The existing reports are confusing, to say the least.

In 323 B.C., at the age of 32, Alexander was in Babylon, preparing for what was perhaps his greatest military expedition, the conquest of Arabia. Though trouble was brewing in Greece, Alexander was determined to push on, taxing his soldiers to the utmost. However, after an apparent illness lasting ten days, Alexander died. It was June 10th, 323 BC.

The ancient historians who recorded the life and times of Alexander provide conflicting accounts of the cause of his death. The common report is that the king died of a marathon drinking bout with his generals. Having performed his regular duties as marshall, Alexander is said to have attended a banquet with Medius, his trusted companion. According to the historian

Plutarch (Life of Alexander, 75), the supposed climax of the party was Alexander's drinking of a "bowl of Hercules" (which held about 12 pints). This resulted in the King's collapse, as though "from a violent blow". Death followed quickly, and Alexander the Great was no more.

Another source, the so-called Royal Journal, gives a less sensational account of Alexander's sudden demise. From the daily entries of this journal it appears that Alexander may have been suffering from a fever before he died. Perhaps malaria or some other tropical disease was the cause of the king's death. The journal gives the impression that the fever was exacerbated by the drinking party, and that Alexander, weakened by his illness, slowly succumbed. Perhaps the negative effects of a serious chest wound which Alexander had previously suffered also contributed to the king's physical weakness. And again, perhaps the recent death of Alexander's friend Hephaestion, who was as dear to him as Patroclus was to Achilles, robbed the king of his lust for life. These are some of the reported causes of Alexander's death which have come down to us.

A more sinister explanation is poisoning. The historian Arrian (VII.27f.) reports a version according to which Antipater had planned to assassinate Alexander. The cupbearer of the king, one Iolaus, supposedly administered the drug, sent by Antipater via Cassander. The drug was secretly mixed with the wine which Alexander drank. Plutarch and Arrian treated this account as a fabricated rumour. Yet the story is significant, for it was evidently concocted to disparage the family of Antipater, and to prevent this pretender to the throne from asserting his position.

Indeed, though rumour, the story of Antipater's plot to poison Alexander had serious consequences. When Olympias, Alexander's mother, returned from exile to Macedon in 317, she removed any political enemies. Among the unfortunate ones was Nicanor, a son of Antipater. Iolaus the cupbearer was also a son of Antipater, and his ashes were thrown to the winds. Clearly the death of Alexander was used by the pretenders to the throne to disparage rivals.

It appears that the reports of Alexander's sudden death differ for a reason. The explanation that the king died of a wound in war or of a tropical disease differs greatly from the story of a sinister murder plan. The death of Alexander inevitably gave rise to rumour, allegation, and propaganda. Just as Alexander's demise produced speculation, so too the death of John Kennedy is used as propaganda by those who survive him. And he, I fear, will not be the last person to suffer "mysterious death".