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Life

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COVER STORY

# His dramatic license collides with history



By Robert Deutsch, USA TODAY

**Nixon:** Not a heavy drinker as in film, biographer says

By Andy Seiler  
USA TODAY

NEW YORK — Let's make one thing perfectly clear: Nixon's back — and Stone's got him.

That means controversy.

*Nixon*, director Oliver Stone's three-hour-plus drama, opens Wednesday on 400 screens, raising new questions about the life of Richard M. Nixon, the only U.S. president to resign while in office. The film implies that Nixon might have been secretly controlled by mysterious figures (played

by Larry Hagman and others) who also anticipated or aided the John F. Kennedy assassination.

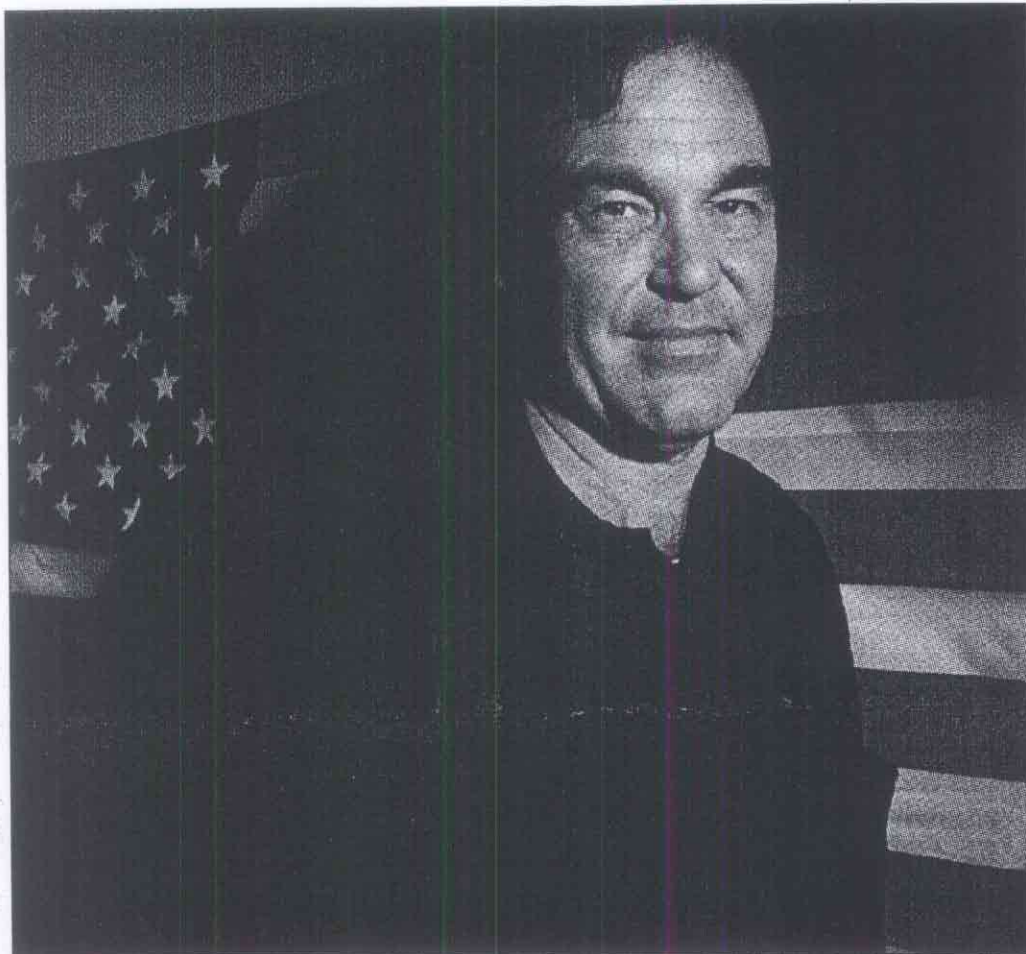
Stone, who opened the wound of the Kennedy assassination with *JFK*, knows he's hit a nerve with *Nixon*.

"Everyone has his own set of baggage regarding the movie," says Stone. He says he made *Nixon* only to "move people to re-examine their prejudices."

"It's *a Nixon*," says Stone. "It's not *the Nixon*. It's not the definitive Nixon." "This is nonsense," says Ray Price, a longtime Nixon friend and staffer who wrote all of Nixon's Watergate speeches, including his resignation speech. "It's

Please see COVER STORY next page ►

# Oliver Stone's 'Nixon'



Above by Robert Hanashiro, USA TODAY; right  
by Sidney Baldwin, Cinergi Pictures

**Capturing 'Nixon':** Oliver Stone,  
above, and at right in a publicity  
photo directing Anthony Hop-  
kins, says filmmakers make  
choices to make a dramatic film.





not a question of not being 'a Nixon' or 'the Nixon,' because it is not Nixon. It is Oliver Stone's Nixon. He specializes in mixing fact and fiction in compelling, theatrical ways so as to distort people's perceptions of the truth. There is no excuse for that when you're dealing with history."

On Monday, the Nixon family and the Richard Nixon Library & Birthplace Foundation called the film "reprehensible."

As a defense against such charges, Stone published his script (Hyperion, \$14.95), co-written with Stephen J. Rivele and Christopher Wilkinson, with extensive historical footnotes and essays by several authors. But even that move has drawn criticism.

Stephen E. Ambrose, author of three highly regarded wars-and-all Nixon biographies (*The Education of a Politician 1913-*

*1962, The Triumph of a Politician 1962-1972 and Ruin and Recovery 1973-1990*, all Simon & Schuster), is cited in those footnotes. But Ambrose says that Stone sometimes cites him as saying "the exact opposite" of what he wrote.

"The past is there to be raped, and Hollywood has been doing it," says Ambrose. "Stone's obsessions remind me of the interpretation that I put on historical events when I was a sophomore in college — and when I was very Marxist. At that time I would have agreed on at least the major outline of this script. Why? Because I didn't know anything."

Ambrose, who has read the script, says it is riddled with inaccuracies.

This criticism is unfair, says Anthony Hopkins, the Oscar-winning actor who portrays Nixon in Stone's film.

"Nixon is not a documentary," says Hopkins. "It's a big rolling saga, a drama of a

man's life. It will stand or fall by that."

Stone pays more attention to history than most filmmakers, Hopkins argues. "He was careful. I think he was concerned. He didn't want to trash Nixon. He didn't want to go out on a limb like he did with *JFK*."

Film critic Roger Ebert says Stone's critics miss the point.

"The last time I saw Walter Cronkite, he was still dressing me down for giving *JFK* a good review," says Ebert. "He was very offended because he thought the movie was dishonest from beginning to end. But Oliver Stone is myth-making, and it's legitimate for movie directors to do that."

But in Stone's case, that's not necessarily a good thing, says Mark C. Carnes, chairman of the Barnard College history department and the editor of the new book *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies*.

"If his purpose is to get Americans to rethink the past

by putting out provocative myths, one of the problems is that in these United States of Amnesia, many Americans haven't thought about the past the first time," says Carnes.

Stone bristles at that. "So what is he claiming, that I'm doing brain damage to the American public — is that it?" he says. "It's absolutely ludicrous. A movie always could be challenged on those conditions."

"I think that if people are really serious about a subject, they will watch a movie and move on, if the movie interests them, to study."

Perhaps, but Stone's views are more powerful than historians' because so many more people see movies than read history books, says Carnes. Stone's simplified interpretations are easier to grasp than the complex details of actual events, he adds.

"What Oliver Stone has shown is that, whatever his credentials as a historian, he is

well-connected with the psyche of the American people," says Carnes. "I think that Stone's darkly conspiratorial view of American political life reflects a more general sense that political processes are too confusing and too amoral to be comprehended."

But Stone says that Richard M. Nixon really is a confusing and complex figure.

"There are large black holes in this story, whatever the official historians say, or the chief priests," says Stone. "Nixon himself was, according to his associates, a bit of a mystery, an enigmatic man ... I think what's important is that Nixon had a secret, that he was a man who gave the impression of hiding something."

But Ambrose says that some of the "secrets" that Stone reveals about Nixon are phony.

"If he wants to get deep into Nixon's character, he's got to get those drinks out of his hands," says Ambrose, who ob-

jects to Nixon's heavy alcohol consumption in the film. "He's got to clean up his language."

Most of the infamous expletives deleted from the Nixon tapes, Ambrose says, were mostly "goddamns," not the far more explicit talk of *Nixon*.

Ambrose's main objection, though, is that he believes Stone is trying to absolve Nixon of responsibility for his actions by arguing that a mysterious, all-powerful military-industrial complex runs the U.S.

But Ebert says that Stone should be encouraged to posit such scenarios.

"I think that you have to grant him the freedom to express himself politically," Ebert says. "His politics are not secret to anyone. The fact is, he's the only director in Hollywood who's interested in taking on the big, controversial political subjects."

But Ambrose says it is Stone's political agenda that worries him.

"He wants respect, even the respect of professional historians," Ambrose says. "He's even really more ambitious than that: He wants to change America. It's nothing short of that. It's very Orwellian to use an interpretation of the recent past to drive a program of redoing America."

Stone counters, "I am a dissident filmmaker. When I say 'dissident,' I say it in the sense of being opposed to official thought. Dissident thought, whether right or wrong, will help a republic."

Stone says filmmakers must make choices, or they won't make a dramatic film.

"What Oliver Stone has done is create a powerful statement that's going to bring many issues to the fore," Carnes says. "Right or wrong, *Nixon* is going to stimulate discussion of our past, and that in itself is a good thing. This republic has never been harmed by too much talk on historical issues."