

Nixon Revisited by Way of the Creative Camera

By RICHARD REEVES



Anthony Hopkins as the 37th President in Oliver Stone's new film "Nixon"—An often-sympathetic portrayal of a heavy drinker holed up in a dark castle called the White House and at war with an underlined "beast."

PRESIDENTS 101

Oliver Stone has resumed his cinematic survey of American leaders, and his sources for Richard M. Nixon include Shakespeare and Oregon Welles as well as an assortment of history books. **11**



Los Angeles

A MONTH OR SO AFTER THE assessment of President John F. Kennedy in the third year of his Presidency, named Richard Goodwin Cooke, Robert Kennedy by saying "John Caesar is an important man, he was the emperor of Rome for a little more than three years."

"Yes," Bobby said, "but it helps if you have Shakespeare to write about you." That's certainly true, but taking up chances on the future, Caesar wrote about himself first. John Kennedy intended to do the same after his Presidency, emulating his hero, Winston Churchill. The 35th President never got the chance, but his memory and memories of him

How far can one go with the defense 'Hey, it's only a movie'?

were well served by two talented assistants: Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. and Theodore Sorensen did their best to immortalize their fallen leader.

But it was not the historian, Schlesinger, or the alter ego, Sorensen, who cast the image of Kennedy that still thrills the world. It was his widow, Jacqueline, telling a friendly writer, Theodore H. White. As night before we'd go to sleep, Jack liked to play some records. The tapes he had to hear were: "Don't let it be for god, shining moment, this is a spot, for one brief hour." There'll be great President again, but there'll never be another Camelot again.

Kennedy's competitor, the 37th President, Richard M. Nixon, did get the chance to make the Churchillian effort to define himself and his deeds in six books written after his resignation in 1974. Both Presidents tape-recorded White House days as material for their memoirs, knowing that one day they would be competing in the marketplace of history with both friends and enemies. **Historical.**

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Richard Reeves, a former New York Times reporter, is a author, most recently of "President Kennedy and Power," he covered the White House during the Administration of Richard M. Nixon and is writing a book about Nixon's Presidency.

ans, playwrights and assorted charlatans would be out there building statues of words and images or tearing them down. Even a film maker — quite an extraordinary one, Oliver Stone — joined the competition, grossly distorting the death and life of Kennedy in "J.F.K." and now offering "Nixon," his version of the rise and agony of that strange man. (The new film, which stars Anthony Hopkins as Nixon and Joan Allen as his wife, Pat, opens on Wednesday.)

Even after four years, a very long time in the movie business, the controversy continues over the intent and accuracy of "J.F.K." Chances are that the film, right or wrong or silly, will play in the minds of a generation or two because the commercial and emotional reach of popular movies is so great. More than 50 million people around the world have seen that film, and many of them seem to have believed every frame.

ONLY LAST APRIL, MR. Stone and I appeared together before the American Society of Newspaper Editors to discuss that movie — or debate its merits and faults — under the program title "When Journalism, History and Art Collide, Where Is Truth?" The most dramatic touch that day came when John Seigenthaler, an assistant to Robert Kennedy who went on to become the editor and publisher of The Nashville Tennessean, stood to address Mr. Stone.

"I appeared before a class of high school students who asked me about what I thought about the assassination," Mr. Seigenthaler began, then went on: "I would say half of them had seen your movie and were convinced that Lyndon Johnson was guilty of conspiracy to murder the President of the United States. Is there any regret on your part for what I consider to be a blood libel on Lyndon Johnson for that accusation of murder? Whatever you admit and whatever doubt you have, there are no doubts in the minds of those children."

Mr. Stone responded with a "Hey, it's only a movie" defense, saying: "I am not responsible for the interpretation that the audience takes away. Sometimes it is misinterpreted."

My contribution, at that point, was to say to Mr. Stone that if this was all entertainment, just another movie, why did Warner Brothers send out cartons of the "J.F.K. Classroom Study Guide," based on the film, to 13,000 school districts around the country. Walt Disney, the studio behind "Nixon," is doing something

similar for the new film.

The marketing is the message. Mr. Stone's obvious brilliance as a director — and the film critics will weigh in later this week — is that he knows better than most exactly what audiences are likely to think and feel when they see his work. That is why "Nixon" opens with a disclaimer, white words on a black screen: "This film is an attempt to understand the truth of Richard Nixon, 37th President of the United States. It is based on numerous public sources and on an incomplete historical record. In consideration of length, events and characters have been condensed, and some scenes among protagonists have been hypothesized or condensed."

What Oliver Stone, scarred by the "J.F.K." attacks, is really saying is this: We are serious people. We read all the books, talked to some of the people, used what we could from the usual sources — and then made up the rest, whatever we needed to make the picture work.

"To govern is to choose," said the real President Kennedy. And that is the critical power, too, of the director — or the journalist or historian. We all create our own truth; it's just that journalists and historians generally cannot use the wonderful and malleable tools of entertainment. We don't make it up. If we do and we are caught, we rarely get a second chance. The movie business is more flexible than that, at least if the

grosses are good.

Mr. Stone would dispute this up and down the line. In debate, he argued: "I think the work of the historian involves great gulps of imagination and speculation, the resurrection of dialogues that frequently were never recorded. I am not trying to denigrate the work of the historian but rather to say that the good historian must know well how elusive this thing is, referred to all too cavalierly by journalists as the truth, the truth, the truth."

Some choosers, truth tellers in their own minds, are more elusive than others. In "J.F.K.," Mr. Stone wanted to make a case based on the credibility of an assassination investigation by Jim Garrison, the New Orleans District Attorney. He chose not to mention that the jury in the monthlong case against alleged conspirators returned with "not guilty" verdicts after only 50 minutes of deliberation. In the script of that film, the summation of the fictional Garrison (played by Kevin Costner) covered 106 lines. Those lines included only six phrases from the real summation, and there was only one complete sentence among them.

That one true sentence from the real Garrison was a quote from Kennedy: "Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country."

To boost the credibility of "Nixon," Mr. Stone has supervised the publication of an annotated screenplay, with 168 research footnotes. (He did the same for "J.F.K." but only after the claimed accuracy of his work was widely challenged.) It's

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pretty shabby stuff. One footnote reads, "The version contained in this script is not intended to reflect the actual contents of that program." More often than not, the notes refer to marginal books and tracts. There are no notes at all for six or seven pages at a time, particularly when Nixon and his wife are talking.

In several key scenes, notes refer to biographies that in fact retell stories from Nixon's own writings. The best example of this — and of how the film was put together — is Mr. Stone's version of the President's post-midnight visit to the Lincoln Memorial on May 9, 1970, as students from around the country gathered in Washington for a large anti-war rally. In 1978, Nixon published his notes of an encounter with protesters who were camping out at the memorial, and his words become the film's dialogue — up to a point.

The end of the scene — in the script, which is condensed a bit here, with one expletive deleted — is set up by Nixon insisting that he is trying to end the war in Vietnam, that he has withdrawn more than half the troops there. Then, the dialogue switches to the fictional:

YOUNG WOMAN: You don't want the war. We don't want the war. The Vietnamese don't want the war. So why does it go on?

(Nixon hesitates, out of answers.)

YOUNG WOMAN: Someone wants it. . . . (a realization) You can't stop it, can you. Even if you wanted to. Because it's not you. It's the system.

YOUNG WOMAN: It sounds like you're talking about a wild animal.

NIXON: Maybe I am. . . .

(As Nixon is led down the steps . . . by H. R. (Bob) Haldeman:)

NIXON: She got it, Bob. A 19-year-old college kid. . . . She understood something it's taken me 25 years in politics to understand. The C.I.A., the Mafia, the Wall Street bastards. . . ."

The System. The Conspiracy. That is Oliver Stone speaking.

The Richard Nixon created by Mr. Stone and played by Mr. Hopkins is not a totally unsympathetic character — at least to Mr. Stone, who sometimes seems downright sentimental about his protagonist. Mr. Stone's Nixon — a gifted and productive man, almost consumed by anger, self-pity and paranoia — sounds a great deal like an older Oliver Stone ranting on about the cruel savagery of "the system."

Nixon, real and cinematic, imagined his life as a struggle against "the Eastern elite," the Ivy Leaguers who run everything, beginning with Wall Street and its old Washington branch, the Central Intelligence Agency. Oliver Stone is the son of a man who went broke on Wall Street (Louis Stone, to whom the film is dedicated). When the money was gone, the son had to leave prep school, a leaving he now celebrates because it allowed him, as he once put it in an interview, to "break out of the mold" that was shaping him as an "East Coast socioeconomic product." The road away from Wall Street (the subject of another of his films, also dedicated to his father) took him to combat in Vietnam and then back home, in his words, "very mixed up, very alienated, very paranoid." Making films, he said in the interview, was the way he learned "to channel my rage."

MR. STONE AND HIS Nixon (and the real Nixon, too) seem to be intent on getting even with America — for what, I don't know. They forget little and seem to forgive nothing, particularly when it comes to the news media. When we debated before the newspaper editors, Mr. Stone described himself this way: "I am one of those who was sent to that war in Vietnam based on a journalist-endorsed lie." In fact, looking at the research cited by Mr. Stone in "J.F.K." and "Nixon," this artist who wants us to believe the essential truth of his skilled prestidigitation has adopted one of journalism's worst impulses. It is a line most editors have heard (or used): "What does it matter whether it's true or not? He said it."

However angry he is about reporters kicking him around, Mr. Stone owes a lot to two of them, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of The Washington Post. The Nixon played

And the system won't let you stop it.

(The girl transfixes him with her eyes. . . .)

NIXON (Stumbling): No, no. I'm not powerless. Because . . . because I understand the system. I believe I can control it. Maybe not control it totally. But . . . tame it enough to do some good.



Anthony Hopkins as President Richard M. Nixon reviewing tapes—Searching for the truth with the malleable tools of entertainment.

Sidney Baldwin/Cinergi Pictures Entertainment

1995
1996
1997



Warner Brothers

Kevin Costner, left, and John Finnegan in Oliver Stone's film "J.F.K."—The controversy continues.

by Mr. Hopkins and constructed by Mr. Stone is the one Mr. Woodward and Mr. Bernstein left for dead in the final pages of their 1974 book "The Final Days": a kneeling-down drunk. Whatever Nixon was before and after those last days in the White House becomes, in this film, prologue and epilogue to this clumsy and babbling lush confined to dark rooms. The man who made the movie seems to have tunnel vision, and there is little light at the end or the beginning of this one, which early on gives a view of the White House as Dracula's castle.

PERHAPS WE SHOULD get used to this new posthumous Nixon because it seems to be the one that works best on film and television. In the television movie "Kissinger and Nixon," which was first broadcast on TNT a week ago and is being repeated on Wednesday night, the awkward drunk in the Oval Office is played by Beau Bridges. In both entertainments, Nixon seems to have a glass glued to his hand. But there are creative differences. On the big screen,

Nixon drinks Scotch, Johnnie Walker Black; on television, his line is: "Let's have a drink. Bourbon all around?"

It may be that no Presidents are heroes to their many valets, but the stumblebum Nixon seems ludicrous to me. He was not a graceful or comfortable man — he once walked me into a stationery closet as he showed me out of his New York office in the late 1970's — but no one in his right mind ever took him to be the demented clown being portrayed now.

Beyond letting us watch a great actor portraying someone we knew too long and perhaps too well, "Nixon" does not make much sense on its own. You almost have to have been there to understand resonant conceits like Maureen Dean's hairdo, or a flashed photograph of J. Robert Oppenheimer, or Nixon secluded in a room in front of a blazing fireplace with the air-conditioning on full blast. With numerous teases hinting at a great Nixon secret, Mr. Stone promises us a Rosebud, something having

to do with the assassination of some body. Fidel Castro? John Kennedy? Robert Kennedy? We never know for sure. That story line erodes, and Nixon has another Scotch.

Sitting through a preview screening of "Nixon" made me think that too much of a fuss may have been made of Mr. Stone's dangerous cinematic brilliance in "J.F.K." In "Nixon," the use of grainy film, quick cutting and deliberately misleading pseudo-documentary techniques seems flatter and flatter because the film has more point of view than point.

What started a national shouting match four years ago was separate from Oliver Stone's mastery of the mysterious powers of cinema. It was not how Mr. Stone said it in "J.F.K." but what he said. He said and marketed the idea that there was a conspiracy at the highest levels of American Government to murder a President. This time, with "Nixon," it is clear that all the Shakespearean pretensions and cinematic pyrotechnics in the world have very little impact if you have nothing much to say.

REMEMBER THE NEEDIEST!