

'Nixon' movie a nightmare revisited

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Oliver Stone's controversial new film, "Nixon," is drama-packed with engrossing scenes, devastating insights — and grotesque distortions. For a Watergate reporter who helped bring down Richard Nixon and wound up high on his enemies list, the movie was a nightmare revisited.

There were really two Nixons; Stone dissected only one of them. His autopsy bared the dark, forbidding, monstrous Nixon at his worst — with only fleeting glimpses of the other, human Nixon.

I must be the last person Nixon would have expected to rise to his defense. During the Watergate era, I found myself engaged in a mortal battle with this dogged, dauntless president. Each damaging story I published created a frenzy inside the White House, causing him to strike back in ways that sometimes exceeded the limits of the law.

At his instigation, the CIA tailed me for months, assigning as many as 18 cars at a time to track my movements; this in deliberate disregard of a law that prohibits CIA investigations on American soil. The illegal caper was called "Operation Mudhen"; I was the mudhen.

Nixon also dispatched aide John Dean to ask the late FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover to dig up some mud to splatter on me. The FBI confiscated all my phone records and compiled a dirty dossier. Watergate Judge John Sirica later ordered the FBI to purge their files of my private phone calls and to lay off.

The Pentagon, meanwhile, conducted 11 separate investigations of me, and the Internal Revenue Service spent four fruitless years trying to find something wrong with my tax returns. Someone inside the

Jack Anderson

IRS even forged a document to create a false case against me.

The notorious White House "plumbers," G. Gordon Liddy and E. Howard Hunt, posted my name on the wall of their basement compound post to inspire them on against the foe. For a while, they thought Nixon wanted me rubbed out, so they secretly sought some exotic CIA poisons to get rid of me.

I could go on.

Yet I am, after all, a reporter. So I am obliged to take exception to Stone's characterization of Nixon. I had detected quite a different Nixon behind the black jowls, shifty eyes and unfortunate ski-slope nose — a shy, introverted man; a sensitive, deeply private person who sometimes woke up in the White House wondering whether he was really president.

He could be as dark and gloomy as Stone portrayed him. His awkward, marionette hand gestures and robot-like responses made him a living caricature of himself. Yet he was no clown; rather, he was a shrewd politician, brilliant strategist and sharp-as-nails negotiator.

He drove himself into one bruising battle after another, slashing his way to the top, suffering inwardly from the political shellfire and accumulating psychological scar tissue along the way.

Beneath the scars, the intimate Nixon was a lonely, suspicious man

who fought so hard for public approval and was rebuffed so often.

Still, his achievements bespeak the inner superiority that unkind fate can nurture — the compensating enlargement of brains, tenacity and guile.

Sources close to Nixon insist he wanted to serve with honor — to be a good president, hopefully even a great president. I know he assigned John Ehrlichman to keep a set of notebooks itemizing his campaign promises. I suspect Nixon intended to fulfill those promises.

But he was confounded by an epic misjudgment that caused him to commit first the blunders and then the offenses that produced the greatest political scandal in American history — Watergate.

Unfortunately, Stone's portrayal of the years leading up to that period contained some grating inaccuracies.

Stone implied, for example, that Nixon conspired with gangster Johnny Roselli in the CIA plot to kill Cuba's Fidel Castro and that Watergate figures E. Howard Hunt and Frank Sturgis were implicated in the plots to assassinate both Castro and John F. Kennedy.

I happen to be the reporter who exposed the CIA's plot to recruit the Mafia to knock off Castro.

I also instigated and guided the Senate investigation that documented the scandal. As that record shows — and my reporting confirmed — Stone's version of the events is simply wrong.

It's a shame, however, that the facts must interfere with what is an otherwise excellent — if incomplete — portrayal of Richard Nixon.

Jack Anderson's column is written with Michael Binstein.

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