

## OPEN FORUM

# Outrage Over 'Nixon' Is Misplaced

By Larry Bensky

**H**ERE WE GO again. Oliver Stone moves some heavy furniture in history's attic, and some of those living down below don't like the noise.

"Reprehensible," says a Nixon family statement. Stone's film, they say, is "maliciously designed to defame and degrade the president."

"Hollywood still gets it wrong," sniffs New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd.

"No one ever asked me or any other persons portrayed in the movie what the facts were," objects former Nixon press secretary Herb Klein, now editor-in-chief of the Copley newspapers.

What has the Nixon family — and journalism establishment centurions like Dowd and Klein — so upset is Stone's consistent unwillingness to stop taking imaginative liberties with the facts and personalities of history.

"Shame on you," they say to Stone, for including in his "Nixon" a plot line implying that the CIA's attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro may have boomeranged and caused President Kennedy's assassination — with Nixon's complicity. "Shame on you," they say, for portraying a foul-mouthed Nixon half-deranged through alcoholism.

"Shame on you," they cluck, for implying that the Nixon-era White House was run by power-crazy schemers like the president's aides, H.R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman. And that the president's chief foreign policy adviser, Henry Kissinger, was a groveling toady to power.

One might reply to all these protests: Shame on you for not realizing that what we have here is a megabucks Hollywood movie, folks. Not a documentary film, not a three-volume history, not a learned lecture. Oliver Stone is doing in "Nixon" what authors since the dawn of drama have done. Take a historical background, choose some powerful, conflicted characters, stir in deeply emotional scenes — and try to hold the audience's attention on the whole whiz bang spectacle.

Why, then, all this outrage at supposed historical inaccuracies? Shouldn't the



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Oliver Stone, left, with Anthony Hopkins on "Nixon" set

outrage be focused instead on why so little mass-media attention has been given, since the Watergate years, to investigating the real history of the Nixon era? Why, for example, the television networks and major media spent the time around his funeral slobbering all over themselves with exonerations for a man who was, arguably, one of the greatest threats to our constitutional form of government in history — not to mention, arguably one of the great war criminals of history?

And how about some outrage at the sensation-driven television networks whose concentration on docudramas in the Oliver Stone genre, although usually much more anodyne in content, has coincided with the abolition of their documentary units? Meaning that any authoritative TV documentary work on something like the Nixon era is now impossible, especially since the "public" television alternative is now so heavily politicized, and so heavily spineless.

Newspaper potentates like Maureen Dowd and Herb Klein are especially poorly placed to criticize Oliver Stone for

creating a work of imagination instead of sticking to "facts." What effort can they point to, for example, on behalf of the New York Times or Copley newspapers to help the public obtain access to more than the outrageously skimpy 63 out of 3,700 hours of famous White House tapes so far released? Or the 85 percent of Nixon White House documents still kept secret.

**A**nd what has the Nixon family done to reverse the patriarch's 20-year campaign to keep his tapes and papers free from public analysis, so that fact-based, rather than imagination-based, work on the Nixon era can be done? In fact, given the continuing shroud of secrecy draped over the Nixon administration, it's inevitable that we get something like Stone's infotainment version of Nixon, rather than the historical exploration which that sad era sorely needs.

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