

Reconstructing Nixon

A line from a New York Times op-ed piece by Charles W. Colson leapt off the page.

"What drew me to Nixon in the first place was . . . his passionate desire for world peace."

Excuse me, is an asterisk called for? Never would I second-guess Howell Raines, the editorial page editor of the Times, but what about innocents born since Watergate, which was, after all, more than 20 years ago? The study of history in our schools today is a bit sketchy. And our universities turn out graduates who have majored in public relations and minored in film. Such disciplines provide few weapons in the search for truth.

It perhaps figures that a whopper like Oliver Stone's great splat would generate other whoppers, like Colson's about Richard M. Nixon. This was a man whose "passionate desire for world peace" led him to prolong an ugly war for four years, who began his administration with the "secret" bombing of Cambodia, a country he later invaded, and who presided over military operations that brought death to 20,000 Americans and uncounted Asians. He tore his country apart, poisoned political discourse for a generation.

Of course Colson has a right to write what he wants about Nixon or anyone else. But to have him lecture us as he did on the evils of "deconstructionism" in history is a bit much: After all, despite a rather noisy repentance, he has declined to detail his sins in the White House. E. Howard Hunt, the spooky plumber, whom Colson hired to burgle Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist's files, is dismissed in half a sentence in his memoirs. Colson deplors Oliver Stone's "radical subjectivism" and tsks that he "would sacrifice truth for the sake of ideology." This from the man whose most famous contribution to the political discourse of the '60s was, "I would walk over my grandmother if necessary to reelect Richard Nixon."

He does not say in his Times screed that he is a different man today because he was "born again." He chastely states, "What was done in Watergate was bad enough, and I have taken responsibility for my part in it." For the benefit of those who can't imagine what this could be, it should be stated that Colson pleaded guilty 24 years ago to obstructing justice. He now runs a prison ministry. Do any inmates feel that being preached to by Colson constitutes "cruel and unusual punishment"? Some might find it so.

We still grapple with the truth about the Vietnam War. Some of those most prominently involved in it continue to

thrash about as if there were some mystery about its origins and causes. Actually, the war was a reflection of three presidents: John F. Kennedy, the cold warrior, who thought he could paste the Russians on the cheap in a toy country; Lyndon B. Johnson, who thought he could succeed where Kennedy had failed; and Nixon, whose "they-can't-do-this-to-me" combativeness, combined with his paranoia, self-pity and mania for secrecy, made him and Vietnam a toxic mix.

Kennedy's secretary of defense, Robert S. McNamara, was last seen wandering around Hanoi, conferring with the small generals who had confounded his projections and cost-benefit analyses—not to mention "strategic hamlets," "pacification," "Rolling Thunder" and winning hearts and minds. He asked The Post's Keith Richburg, "How did it come about?"

McNamara's quest has all the credibility of O.J. Simpson's search for his wife's killers. He should read William Prochnau's excellent new book, "Once Upon a Distant War," and see himself as he was as the lead advocate of this doomed and wretched war, with his slide-rule mind, his snapping-turtle certainties, and his obtuseness.

Ostensibly a vivid and meticulous reconstruction of a little band of tiger-journalists, young, rebellious and driven, the book is on another layer the story of a government bent on deceiving itself. Jack Kennedy wanted to intervene, but invisibly; he wanted to escalate, but unobserved. The defining metaphor is presented by Prochnau: In 1962, a U.S. carrier in plain sight of the whole world steams up the Saigon River to the heart of the teeming city. The military denies it is there.

The U.S. military is charged with the mission of telling the U.S. correspondents that everything is under control, that the Vietnamese units are fighting bravely and taking over defense of their own county. The correspondents—David Halberstam of the New York Times, Neil Sheehan of UPI, Malcolm Browne and Peter Arnett of AP, Horst Fass, a German combat photographer, and lordly Charlie Mohr of Time—were having none of it. They would grab a cab and go to the front and see the truth.

By 1968, only Richard Nixon would have sought to revive and prolong the unspeakable war. Only Chuck Colson would have the gall to present the sick and destructive impulse as a "passionate desire for world peace."