

Henry Kissinger

Stone's Nixon

Oliver Stone's "Nixon" raises an issue that goes far beyond its fairness to Nixon—it goes to the responsibility of the motion picture industry to history itself. It's often argued that historical dramas can never be completely accurate because the artist requires creative license to put forth his interpretation of events, perhaps with a disclaimer to the effect that some events are fictionalized.

But how is the viewer to discern which portions of a three-hour film are real and which imaginary? On the one hand, the docudrama mimics reality: It appropriates the names of real persons; the actors are made to resemble the characters they play; the plot is developed against a backdrop of allusion to actual events in familiar settings—such as the Oval Office and the Capitol. Yet the characters go on to say and do things that their real-life counterparts never said or did; all of it deliberate and in the interest of creating a more compelling and more profitable drama than the truth alone might have provided.

With a filmmaker as adept as Stone, the viewer is almost completely at the mercy of the fast cuts, the rapid alternation of color with black-and-white photography for the purpose of giving a "realistic," "newsreel" appearance, and other devices of the craft designed to induce a suspension of disbelief. When in "JFK" and "Nixon" Stone implies that two successive presidents—Johnson and Nixon—were somehow involved in the assassination of Kennedy and that Nixon was in the end destroyed by his alleged tangential connection with that plot, one is beyond the limits of creative license and in the realm of purposeful misinformation. This problem, serious enough for American audiences, becomes magnified abroad, where many viewers lack any background for assessing what they are seeing.

What will be the ultimate consequences for our democracy of this triumph of technique over substance? Our country has practiced its liberties in the comforting belief that they are protected by an informed citizenry and a free and vigorous press. Truth, as John Stuart Mill argued, in the end prevails in the competitive marketplace of ideas. But what if public discourse becomes warped by powerful engines of myth, big budgets and outright falsehoods?

In an age when far more people gain their understanding of the past from movies and television than from the written word, the truth is not a responsibility filmmakers can shrug off as an incidental byproduct of creative license. If a radical writer proclaimed the existence of a conspiracy such as Stone's "Beast"—an absurd assemblage of military, CIA, business leaders and Mafioso dominating the U.S. government—an author with an opposing view would almost surely write a rebuttal that would be as accessible to the general public as the original charge. But when a filmmaking wizard such as

Oliver Stone puts forward a caricature of history on a \$40 million budget, there is little chance a rebuttal will emerge backed by the same means and comparable level of expertise—apart from the fact that truthful history rarely lends itself to the simplified presentation that evokes dramatic impact.

In Oliver Stone's film, Nixon's policies are presented as the product of a disturbed personality—frequently inebriated and driven by a

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combination of inferiority complex and pressure from a shadowy conspiracy of Mafia, CIA, military and big business figures. Nixon as a grotesque is deprived of the stature to give his fall the tragic dimension Stone claims to convey. The viewer remains at a loss as to how such a personality could have produced the achievements—mentioned only in passing—for which Nixon will, despite everything, be remembered: the opening to China, the relaxation

of tensions with the Soviet Union, the breakthrough toward peace in the Middle East and, when all is said and done, ending the war he had inherited in Vietnam.

Ironically, the truth would have offered a much better backdrop to Stone's intended tale of the fallen overachiever. Nixon was far from being the ranting and impetuous character of the film. Few presidents can have agonized more deeply or meticulously over decisions than did Richard Nixon—at least in the field of foreign policy. Rather than posturing assertiveness, Nixon's decision-making reflected a nearly obsessive reluctance to overrule subordinates to their faces. Since Nixon abhorred large meetings, especially those that might produce a clash of personalities, he preferred to hear disagreements one to one or, better yet, via memorandum. Nixon almost never conveyed his decisions orally to a group, especially one containing potential dissenters. If he rejected the views of Cabinet members or other senior associates, he would generally do so in writing or through emissaries, most frequently H. R. Haldeman or John Mitchell. Whatever the decision, it was never spur of the moment but the result of an excruciating process of reviewing options—excruciating not only for himself but for those he consulted. (These, by the way, in the field of foreign policy, included none of the fallen courtiers mentioned in the book Stone put out to support his film.)

Nixon's style of decision-making produced its own problems, but these were the precise opposite of what the movie depicts. He never fired from the hip, but went over his options on and on until those of us who participated in the process sometimes wished that another crisis would come along to interrupt the exercise—aware with a sinking feeling that even then the review would surely continue on the telephone. In short, Nixon acted as he did not out of machismo but from calculation; not boisterously, but with a kind of grim, almost



ANTHONY HOPKINS AND JOAN ALLEN IN "NIXON"

resigned, determination. And since he was rarely confident of success, his lonely decisions reflected a remarkable self-discipline and dedication.

Stone's reliance for expert advice on marginal members of the Nixon White House causes him to confuse grandiloquent, Walter Mitty-esque explanations with which Nixon sometimes regaled his entourage after the event with the brooding, determined quality of Nixon's statesmanship when decisions were actually being made.

Stone's failure to grasp this central aspect of Nixon's character causes him to thrash about between the Nixon of his preconceptions and the Nixon he encountered in his research, without gaining a foothold on reality. A host of inaccuracies results. Neither I nor anyone I know ever heard Nixon call his wife "Buddy," address any foreign leader—least of all Brezhnev—by his first name or refer to himself in the third person; or saw him sitting alone in a dark Lincoln Sitting Room with a bottle of whiskey at his side (the film's opening scene); or, indeed, ever witnessed his either drinking during business hours or compulsively afterward. Nixon's meeting with Mao did not take place in a grandiose setting, and their conversation was far more thoughtful than the trivialities exchanged in the film. And what is the point of having me smoke cigars when it is easy enough to determine that I have never smoked?

Unable to admit the rational basis for Nixon's decisions, Stone invokes bizarre demons—for example, "the Beast," which allegedly keeps Nixon from ending the Vietnam War. In the course of daily contacts extending over nearly six years, I never heard Nixon refer to any such individual or group, nor does Haldeman in his meticulous record of Nixon's activities mention anything resembling it. And, of course, Stone himself never puts a name to any member of this preposterous group. This propels Stone to yet another fantasy: Nixon's alleged involvement with an assassination ring, purportedly approved by Eisenhower, which in the film's fevered imaginings led to Kennedy's assassination, blighted Nixon's conscience and turned into the dark, unspoken obsession of his administration.

Resurrecting the Vietnam era in this simplistic manner ultimately deprives the film of even dramatic impact. How much more interesting it would have been to reexamine the period as a series of complicated, often heartbreaking, dilemmas than as a morality play of black-and-white choices. A more balanced presentation would have acknowledged that Nixon had inherited a real and not

imaginary, much less a psychological, problem. His predecessors had saddled America with 550,000 military personnel in Indochina pursuing a flawed dual strategy: defending 700 miles of open, trackless jungle borders across which stood enemy sanctuaries protected by a specious neutrality, while trying to bring democracy to a rump country that had never been self-governing within existing borders, much less democratic.

Frustration was inevitable. Growing opposition to a war that had enjoyed nearly universal support when it was initiated spiraled from the judgment that, as fought, the war was unwinnable and escalated into criticism of the morality of American policy, finally into an assault, often violent, upon the values of American society.

The implication of "Nixon" is that ending such a tragedy would have been as simple as satisfying the yearnings of a 19-year-old antiwar protester featured at length, but for the "Beast" and Nixon's psychological proclivity for bombing. This interpretation is oblivious to Nixon's real challenge: that extricating 550,000 troops surrounded by more than a million armed Vietnamese, some of them on our side, required strategy, not posturing; that Nixon felt a deep responsibility to the millions of Vietnamese who had cast their lot with America, relying on the promises of previous administrations; that he would make any remotely reasonable concession short of turning over those who had opted for freedom to the mercy of the Communists, as Hanoi demanded and the protest movement increasingly supported.

Nixon strove to give the people of South Vietnam an opportunity to determine their own fate and to strengthen their capacity to defend themselves. Simultaneously, he managed to withdraw 150,000 American troops unilaterally each year. By the end of his first term, only 25,000 American troops remained, and casualties, reduced by 50 percent each year, were comparable to those of the last year before America's role was changed from advisory to combat.

In the end, Nixon did achieve what he had promised: a settlement that preserved our allies and ended our participation in the war—all this in the midst of the most violent domestic upheavals since the Civil War. The debate as to whether the agreement was worth it or was doomed from the beginning will now likely go on forever because Congress preempted its being tested by eliminating both the carrot of economic aid even for South Vietnam and the stick of military enforcement against Hanoi.

To be sure, Nixon's reaction to the domestic turmoil led him into some excessive actions, and he paid for his transgressions. But his actions did not occur in a vacuum; rarely had America witnessed such a systematic campaign of civil disobedience.

This is in the end a challenge to the self-restraint and sense of responsibility of the movie industry. Whatever the outcome, the controversy about "Nixon" would in all likelihood elicit a grim smile from my old chief: Since three-hour movies are not made about insignificant personalities, he had after all triumphed over his adversaries by obliging even Oliver Stone to accord him major historical stature.

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The writer, a former secretary of state, is president of Kissinger Associates, an international consulting firm that has clients with business interests in many countries abroad.