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EXAMINER

# Oliver Stone plays fast and loose with the truth

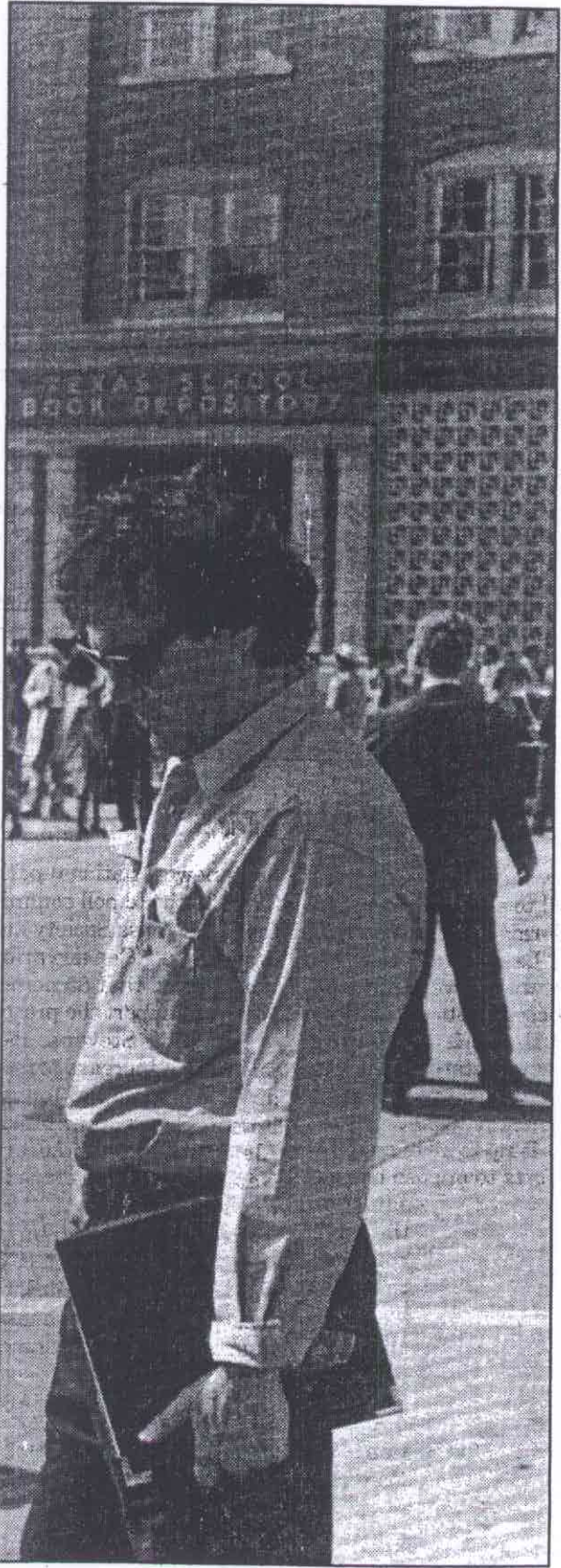
Filmmaker's message as trustworthy as Oliver North testimony

By Barbara Shulgasser  
EXAMINER MOVIE CRITIC

I'm having trouble discerning the difference between Oliver Stone and that other famous self-confessed truth fudger, Oliver North.

They both played a part in the Vietnam War. They both have goofy smiles. They both have serious five o'clock shadows. (Say, does this remind you of anyone else?) And they both have arrogantly contended that they knew best about a number of controversial subjects. They also seemed to believe that the soundest way to persuade the American public of the truth of their views was, oddly enough, to lie.

North lied to Congress about his role in sleazily trading arms for hostages with the enemy Iran government and other unclean acts because, as he has stated repeatedly, he knew that lying — never mind the trading — was the right thing to do. Now, members of Congress are so used to dissembling as a way of life that they probably assume anyone



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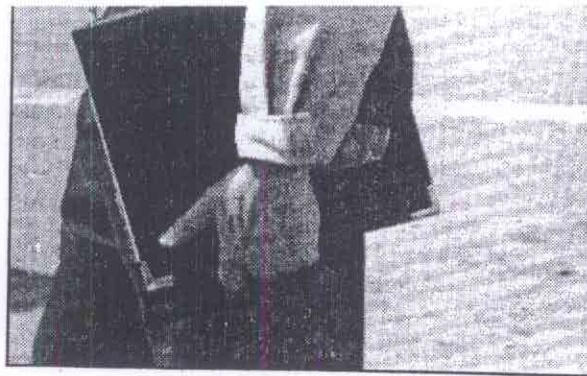
Politicians lie so much themselves — lying is practically written into their job descriptions — that they no doubt think of it as a harmless conversational ploy, akin to inquiring "How are you?" when you really couldn't care less.

Like members of the National Rifle Association or tobacco industry lobbyists, liars have a natural affinity with their own kind. North probably never felt more comfortable than when he was sitting in front of a congressional committee spinning yarns. I guess it's kind of like speaking German. When everyone knows that the verb is coming at the end, it doesn't seem odd.

But Stone is a much more dangerous fellow. He lies to innocent movie goers. People who believe that Harrison Ford is afraid of snakes. People who believe that Sharon Stone would have sex with Michael Douglas. People who believe that Demi Moore read Nathaniel Hawthorne. People who believe that Richard Nixon had a Welsh accent. (Anthony Hopkins is one of the English-speaking world's great actors and I look forward to seeing him when Stone makes "The Life of Ed Sullivan.")

In "JFK," when Stone told them that Lyndon Johnson was in on the John Kennedy assassination, gullible moviegoers bought it. In "Nixon," when Stone proposed that Nixon was in Dallas the morning of John Kennedy's assassination, thousands of audience members no doubt said to themselves, "How interesting." I said to myself: was Nixon checking that Lee Harvey Oswald was at his post in the Book Depository window? Or was he just getting some barbecue to go?

Stone has made a career of setting out to prove to the American public that the CIA, the FBI, the Pentagon, the National Security Council, Congress and various presidents have been lying to us for years. I have no problem with that. Or let me put it more plainly. What else is new? The point is that I can wallow in my own baseless paranoid nightmares with no help from professionals like Stone. What I expect from a man who makes his living being a ranting maniac is some facts. The easiest thing in the world is



**Oliver Stone  
filmed parts of  
"JFK" at the  
Texas School  
Book Depository  
for authenticity  
in a film bashed  
by some for  
inaccuracies.**

to invent in the privacy of your own brain pan conspiracies linking Jane Fonda's last marriage with a scheme to ruin the cable television industry as we now know it, or the AIDS virus with a right-wing plot to sell AZT. But if a guy is going to take three hours of my time to link Richard Nixon with the Kennedy assassination, the least he can do is offer some tiny hint of evidence to support his contention.

Stone's strategy is to mix bits of the truth with tasty morsels of what he has characterized as informed speculation. The trouble is that as dazzlingly dramatic and cinematic as Stone's theorizing may be, none of it turns out to be true. I especially applaud the fact that in the effort to "footnote" his research on "Nixon," Stone has hired as technical consultants such reliable sources as convicted felon John Dean, a fellow who served time for his role in the Watergate coverup that eventuated Nixon's ignominious resignation. If anyone is going to have an ax to grind, it'll be an ex-con.

The trouble with mixing unlabeled lies with historical truth is that such treatment casts suspicion on the truth, too. Stone suggests that there is a connection between the break-in by Nixon's men into the Democratic National headquarters and the Bay of Pigs shenanigans (a failed CIA-planned invasion of Cuba). I like Stone's thinking here, but is there anything other than perversity to support this delicious notion? We really want to know.

Of course, Stone can argue that the cinema has a long (and verifiable, I might add) history of playing loosely with the facts. Roosevelt, Jefferson, Capone, Lindbergh, Gehrig, Ruth, Napoleon, Hitler, Lincoln, Custer, Pocahontas and many other historical figures have been lovingly lied about in the movies. And anyway, Stone's implied theme is that the truth is what we've chosen to believe. Who is to say that the stories in history books are any truer than what Stone has proffered as Oliverian truth?

Given Stone's obsession with the Vietnam War and with liars, his next subject ought to be "The Unbelievable Robert MacNamara, Or How a Defense Secretary Ran an Unpopular Southeast Asian War and Lived to Say it Was a Mistake." There must be a lie or two in there somewhere that will spark the great director's imagination.