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## Stone's Nixon, Nixon's Vietnam

*What the movie misses: There was a method to the madness.*

Oliver Stone's "Nixon" is, unavoidably, a Vietnam movie. A flaw is built in. There is dramatic reason, in what is first and foremost a psychological portrait, to keep a tight focus on President Nixon's personality. But the result is an image of Vietnam policy emerging principally from a Nixon self-perception, one slyly cultivated by his aide Henry Kissinger, as a "mad bomber." A director of Stone's gifts had it in him to have reached for the historical and strategic context. He falls short.

True, we were all psychoanalysts of Nixon even before Stone came along. Political analysis always seemed a weak tool to probe his lonely passions. We had him on the couch for years. From Stone we learn a good deal in this department. But not about Vietnam, one of the two most salient events, along with Wa-

tergate, of the Nixon presidency (1969-74).

In the movie, the mad bomber thing is depicted as a pure expression of Nixon's own unprincipled and driven character. There is a revealing moment when, Hanoi having come back to the table after a bombing episode, Nixon is seen accepting his staff's congratulations in some surprise that the tactic worked. In the movie's view, he is never so human as when he is a psychopath.

But the bombing was, I believe, more than an explosion of the emotional mines planted in a deprived childhood, if it was that. It surely also had something to do with a view of how the United States ought to act in the world. A fair judgment of Nixon on Vietnam has to wrap in more homely considerations of government-made policy than "Nixon" allows.

Almost as many Americans died in Vietnam on Nixon's watch (28,000) as on Lyndon Johnson's (30,000). The costs in domestic divisiveness and distraction were similarly high. But there was a difference. Under LBJ the deaths took place while the United States was getting in and under Nixon while the United States was getting out. Getting into a civil war that, because of Hanoi's international communist connection, was more than a civil war. Getting out of a war that our act of joining had transformed into something even more. In the movie, no note is given Nixon, for whom Vietnam was an inheritance not an initiative, for his undoing of another's prior error.

Much of that, of course, was Nixon's fault. By his Watergate offenses and by the excesses of his open as well as his initially secret military operations, he made his own errors.

In this way he consumed the political capital that might have let him ride out the storms generated by the loathsome casualties.

Even so—and this element is missing from the movie—the people were with him. The casualties were being hung around his neck, the duplicities in the Pentagon Papers had been revealed and Watergate was in full flood, but still Nixon in the 1972 elections overwhelmed the anti-war challenger, George McGovern.

How? This too is missing. Certainly a large reason is that many citizens accepted Nixon's stated purpose of preserving an element of national choice for the imperfect South Vietnamese. This was the "peace with honor" Nixon sought. We critics thought the price too high. But the deal met a requirement to demonstrate American constancy to a client

to whom, however unwisely, commitments had been made. This was widely accepted as a great-power principle even when its specific application to Vietnam was denied.

In the end—and this is missing too—Watergate collapsed the Nixon presidency, and Nixon and his successor could no longer keep the Democratic congressional majority from defaulting on those commitments. Congress said he should never have made them. Twenty years later, that dispute over blame still simmers.

Whether Vietnam's fate finally mattered to others is also still under review. Some stress the subsequent Soviet and guerrilla adventures of the 1970s and 1980s and their contribution to the collapse of detente. Others point to the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union, one result being the current effort by united Communist

Vietnam to knit up ties with the United States.

Thus we arrive at the core question of whether the Cold War was legitimate. Was it more than hokum, accident and tragedy? Were those casualties for a necessary or at least unavoidable cause? On this issue the movie is explicitly blank but implicitly revisionist. "Nixon," defying Nixon, says the Cold War was an American hoax.

I don't accept that. There was such a thing as a Communist menace, for all that it was misperceived and misfought. A country that plainly intended to play a world role could not avoid countering that menace in some form. There were awful costs, especially the casualties in Vietnam. But it dishonors their sacrifice to say they died in vain. A movie like this, as strong a solvent as it is, cannot wipe away a threat that was real.