The Editorial Notebook

NIXON ON THE BIG SCREEN

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OLIVER Stone's "Nixon" is a powerful cinematic experience, stunning to the eye, at times deeply moving, and always, always interesting.

At times, it invites comparisons to truly great films of the past — even Orson Welles' "Citizen Kane."

At times it is also good history.

But only at times, and there lies the problem. Like Stone's "JFK," this film blithely blurs the line between fact and fiction, leaving the young, the ill-informed or the forgetful unaware of what really happened and what didn't.

The prologue includes the following warning:

This film is an attempt to understand the truth of Richard Nixon, 37th President of the United States. It is based on numerous public sources and on an incomplete historical record. In consideration of length, events and characters have been condensed and some scenes among protagonists have been conjectured.

Conjectured?

Characters condensed?

Understanding the truth!

Well, so what, you may ask. Didn't Shakespeare do as much when he wrote his historical dramas? In more recent times, films like "Eleanor and Franklin" and "Sunrise at Campobello" took gentle liberties with the story of Franklin Roosevelt, and Gore Vidal's "Lincoln" did the same for the Great Emancipator. Teddy Roosevelt, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson have been the subjects of Broadway musicals.

Yet there is something very different about the kind of liberty that Stone takes with his story. He asserts that Richard Nixon (admirably played by Anthony Hopkins) was in regular communication with a Texas fascist whose wink may have dispatched John F. Kennedy in 1963. These sequences, in which "Dallas" star Larry Hagman chillingly portrays "Jack Jones," a fictional Texan (or was he condensed?), are destined to be morphed into the Nixon story, just as much as the real-life episodes, including the Checkers speech, the "last press conference" and Watergate.

At its best, "Nixon" recreates those events in a dynamic way. Flashbacks to the President's boyhood and youth offer reasons why he grew up to be so ambitious, so resentful and ultimately so conflicted.

> "A broken Nixon ... stops in front of a portrait of his former adversary, Jack Kennedy. He speaks to it: 'When they look at you,' he laments, 'they see what they want to be. When they look at me, they see what they are.' "

The late President's children are understandably alarmed by the portrayals of their parents, and yet both Richard and Pat Nixon emerge as sympathetic humans who, in spite of their weaknesses, remained true to one another. Pat Nixon, unforgettably played by actress Joan Allen, is three-dimensional — at times loving, at times cruel, almost always sympathetic. Although I watched Mrs. Nixon on the public stage for 40 years, I never cared for her in the way that I do now, thanks to this performance.

Both Allen and Hopkins deserve Academy Award nominations for the dining room scene — the most gripping moment of its kind since Orson Welles and Ruth Warrick dined in "Citizen Kane."

I suspect that many will come away feeling equally sympathetic for Richard Nixon because of Hopkins' remarkable performance. Any actor who can convincingly play Hannibal Lecter, theologian C. S. Lewis, a perfect English butler *and* Richard Nixon deserves every award in the book.

I well recall struggling with the conflicts of the Nixon life and career last year when I prepared this newspaper's obituary editorial. Richard Nixon was a failure as president, yet some of his accomplishments were remarkable. Stone's film successfully reminds us of some of these: the opening to China, detente with the Russians, an end to the Vietnam War, creation of the Environmental Protection Agency and OSHA, etc.

The side of Nixon that achieved great things may have resulted from the high expectations of his unbending Quaker mother, Hannah Milhous Nixon; the scenes featuring her in this film are riveting.

"Strength in this life," she tells her son, "happiness in the next." Hannah Nixon saw two of her four sons die young (events that Stone says haunted Richard Nixon all his life). Her husband, Frank, was a mean, narrow man whose idea of creative parenting was to take his children to the woodshed. Shame was a byword in the Nixon household, and as an adult, some would suggest President Nixon courted it.

The scenes from young Richard's life are filmed in black-and-white, giving the California days a grim feeling like the Kansas portions of "The Wizard of Oz." And, in fact, the colorful years that follow take Nixon on a journey of sorts that was not unlike Dorothy's. In the end, however, the nightmare was of Nixon's own creation, and sadly enough, he was unable to return to his roots in time to save himself from destruction.

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Anthony Hopkins and Joan Allen as Richard and Pat Nixon.

Like "JFK," "Nixon" is the kind of film that will inspire arguments and debate for a long time to come. Oliver Stone has a knack for making us reconsider our history.

The imagined dialogue can be marvelous — and it doesn't necessarily detract from what history proves to be truth. Consider this scene, an eerie nocturnal exchange on a Washington bridge between White House Counsel John Dean and Watergate conspirator E. Howard Hunt:

"John," says Hunt: "sooner or later — sooner I think — you are going to learn the lesson that has been learned by everyone who has ever gotten close to Richard Nixon. That he's the darkness reaching out for the darkness. And eventually, it's either you or him. Look at the landscape of his life and you'll see a boneyard.... And he's already digging your grave, John."

Many of the best lines in "Nixon" come straight out of the record: portions from Nixon's 1960 debates with Kennedy, the 1968 acceptance remarks, the resignation speech and the maudlin farewell to his staff in August 1974. And snippets of Oval Office conversation from those infamous tapes.

Then there is one more unforgettable moment near the film's end. A broken Nixon, after signing his resignation letter, crippled from phlebitis, shuffles through the White House hallway and stops in front of a portrait of his former adversary, Jack Kennedy. He speaks to it:

"When they look at you," he laments, "they see what they want to be. When they look at me, they see what they are."

In two sentences, Stone's film explains the difference between the two men — and why both of them have remained presences in our hearts, minds and politics for nearly a half century.

'NIXON': NO PROFILE IN COURAGE

BY RICHARD REEVES

The writer, a former *New York Times* reporter, is the author of *President Kennedy: Profile of Power*. He covered the White House during the Nixon administration and is writing a book about Nixon's presidency.

LOS ANGELES — A month or so after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in the third year of his presidency, a young White House assistant named Richard Goodwin tried to console Robert Kennedy by saying: "Julius Caesar is an immortal, and he was only emperor of Rome for a little more than three years."

"Yes," Bobby said, "but it helps if you have Shakespeare to write about you." That's certainly true, but taking no chances on the future, Caesar wrote about himself first.

John Kennedy intended to do the same after his presidency, emulating his hero, Winston Churchill. The 35th president never got the chance, but his memory and memories of him were well served by two talented assistants: Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. and Theodore Sorensen did their best to immortalize their fallen leader.

But it was not the historian, Schlesinger, or the alter ego, Sorensen, who cast the image of Kennedy that still thrills the world. It was his widow, Jacqueline, telling a friendly writer, Theodore H. White: "At night before we'd go to sleep, Jack liked to play some records. The lines he loved to hear were: 'Don't let it be forgot, that there once was a spot, for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot.' There'll be great presidents again, but there'll never be another Camelot again."

Kennedy's competitor, the 37th president, Richard M. Nixon, did get the chance to make the Churchillian effort to define himself and his deeds in six books written after his resignation in 1974.

Both presidents tape-recorded White House days as material for their memoirs, knowing that one day they would be competing in the marketplaces of history with both friends and enemies.

Historians, playwrights and assorted charlatans would be out there building statues of words and images or tearing them down. Even a film maker — quite an extraordinary one, Oliver Stone — joined the competition, grossly distorting the death and life of Kennedy in "JFK" and now offering "Nixon," his version of the rise and agony of that strange man.

Even after four years, a very long time in the movie business, the controversy continues over the intent and accuracy of "JFK." Chances are that the film, right or wrong or silly, will play in the minds of a generation or two because the commercial and emotional reach of popular movies is so great. More than 50 million people around the world have seen that film, and many of them seem to have believed every frame.

Only last April, Stone and I appeared together before the American Society of Newspaper Editors to discuss that movie — or debate its merits and faults — under the program title "When Journalism, History and Art Collide, Where Is Truth?" The most dramatic touch that day came when John Seigenthaler, an assistant to Robert Kennedy who went on to become the editor and publisher of *The Nashville Tennessean*, stood to address Stone.

"I appeared before a class of high school students who asked me about what I thought about the assassination," Seigenthaler began, then went on: "I would say half of them had seen your movie and were convinced that Lyndon Johnson was guilty of conspiracy to murder the president of the United States. Is there any regret on your part for what I consider to be a blood libel on Lyndon Johnson for that accusation of murder? Whatever you admit and whatever doubt you have, there are no doubts in the minds of those children."

Stone responded with a "Hey, it's only a movie" defense, saying: "I am not responsible for the interpretation that the audience takes away. Sometimes it is misinterpreted."

My contribution, at that point, was to say to Stone that if this is all entertainment, just another movie, why did Warner Brothers send out cartons of the *'JFK' Classroom Study Guide*, based on the film, to 13,000 school districts around the country. Walt Disney, the studio behind "Nixon," is doing something similar for the new film.

The marketing is the message. Stone's obvious brilliance as a director is that he knows better than most exactly what audiences are likely to think and feel when they see his work.

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"To govern is to choose," said the real President Kennedy. And that is the critical power, too, of the director — or the journalist or historian. We all create our own truth; it's just that journalists and historians generally cannot use the wonderful and malleable tools of entertainment. We don't make it up. If we do and we are caught, we rarely get a second chance. The movie business is more flexible than that, at least if the grosses are good.

Stone would dispute this up and down the line. In debate, he argued: "I think the work of the historian involves great gulps of imagination and speculation, the resurrection of dialogues that frequently were never recorded. I am not trying to denigrate the work of the historian but rather to say that the good historian must know well how elusive this thing is, referred to all too cavalierly by journalists as the truth, the truth, the truth."

Some choosers, truth tellers in their own minds, are more elusive than others. In "JFK," Stone wanted to make a case based on the credibility of an assassination investigation by Jim Garrison, the New Orleans district attorney. He chose not to mention that the jury in the monthlong case against alleged conspirators returned with "not guilty" verdicts after only 50 minutes of deliberation.

In the script of that film, the summation of the fictional Garrison (played by Kevin Costner) covered 106 lines. Those lines included only six phrases from the real summation, and there was only one complete sentence among them. That one true sentence from the real Garrison was a quote from Kennedy: "Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country."

To boost the credibility of "Nixon," Stone has supervised the publication of an annotated screenplay, with 168 research footnotes. (He did the same for "JFK" but only after the claimed accuracy of his work was widely challenged.) It's pretty shabby stuff. One footnote reads, "The version contained in this script is not intended to reflect the actual contents of that program."

More often than not, the notes refer to marginal books and tracts. There are no notes at all for six or seven pages at a time, particularly when Nixon and his wife are talking.

In several key scenes, notes refer to biographies that in fact retell stories from Nixon's own writings. The best example of this — and of how the film was put together — is Stone's version of the president's post-midnight visit to the Lincoln Memorial on May 9, 1970, as students from around the country gathered in Washington for a large anti-war rally.

In 1978, Nixon published his notes of an encounter with protesters who were camping out on the memorial's steps, and his words become the film's dialogue — up to a point.

The end of the scene — in the script, which is condensed a bit here, with one expletive deleted — is set up by Nixon insisting that he is trying to end the war in Vietnam, that he has withdrawn more than half the troops there. Then, the dialogue switches to the fictional:

YOUNG WOMAN: You don't want the war. We don't want the war. The Vietnamese don't want the war. So why does it go on?

(Nixon hesitates, out of answers.)

YOUNG WOMAN: Someone wants it. ... (a realization) You can't stop it, can you. Even if you wanted to. Because it's not you. It's the system. And the system won't let you

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(The girl transfixes him with her eyes. . . .)

NIXON (Stumbling): No, no. I'm not powerless. Because ... because I understand the system. I believe I can control it. Maybe not control it totally. But ... tame it enough to do some good.

YOUNG WOMAN: It sounds like you're talking about a wild animal.

NIXON: Maybe I am....

(As Nixon is led down the stairs to the limousine by H. R. (Bob) Haldeman:)

A final salute, following his resignation in August 1974.

NIXON: She got it, Bob. A 19-year-old college kid.... She understood something it's taken me 25 years in politics to understand. The CIA, the Mafia, the Wall Street bastards...."

The System. The Conspiracy. That is Oliver Stone speaking.

The Richard Nixon created by Stone and played by Hopkins is not a totally unsympathetic character — at least to Stone, who sometimes seems downright sentimental about his protagonist.

Stone's Nixon — a gifted and productive man, almost consumed by anger, self-pity and paranoia — sounds a great deal like an older Oliver Stone ranting on about the cruel savagery of "the system."

Nixon, real and cinematic, imagined his life as a struggle against "the Eastern elite," the Ivy Leaguers who run everything, beginning with Wall Street and its old Washington branch, the Central Intelligence Agency.

Oliver Stone is the son of a man who went broke on Wall Street (Louis Stone, to whom the film is dedicated). When the money was gone, the son had to leave prep school, a leaving he now celebrates because it allowed him, as he once put it in an interview, to "break out of the mold" that was shaping him as an "East Coast socioeconomic product."

The road away from Wall Street (the subject of another of his films, also dedicated to his father) took him to combat in Vietnam and then back home, in his words, "very mixed up, very alienated, very paranoid." Making films, he said in the interview, was the way he learned "to channel my rage."

Stone and his Nixon (and the real Nixon, too) seem to be intent on getting even with America — for what, I don't know. They forget little and seem to forgive nothing, particularly when it comes to the news media.

When we debated before the newspaper editors, Stone described himself this way: "I am one of those who was sent to that war in Vietnam based on a journalist-endorsed lie." In fact, looking at the research cited by Stone in both "JFK" and "Nixon," this artist who wants us to believe the essential truth of his skilled prestidigitation has adopted one of the worst impulses of journalism. It is a line most editors have heard (or used): "What does it matter whether it's true or not? He said it."

However angry he is about reporters kicking him around, Stone owes a lot to two of them, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of *The Washington Post*. The Nixon played by Hopkins and constructed by Stone is the one Woodward and Bernstein left for dead in the final pages of their 1974 book *The Final Days:* a kneeling-down drunk.

Whatever Richard Nixon was before and after those last days in the White House becomes, in this film, prologue and epilogue to this clumsy and babbling lush confined to dark rooms. The man who made the movie seems to have tunnel vision, and there is little light at the end or the beginning of this one, which early on gives a view of the White House as Dracula's castle.

Perhaps we should get used to this new posthumous Nixon because it seems to be the one that works best on film and television. In the television movie "Kissinger and Nixon," which broadcast on TNT this month, the awkward drunk in the Oval Office is played

by Beau Bridges.

In both entertainments, Nixon seems to have a glass glued to his hand. But there are creative differences. On the big screen, Nixon drinks Scotch, Johnnie Walker Black; on television, his line is: "Let's have a drink. Bourbon all around?"

It may be that no presidents are heroes to their many valets, but the stumblebum Nixon seems ludicrous to me. He was certainly not a graceful or comfortable man — he once walked me into a stationery closet as he showed me out of his New York office in the late 1970s — but no one in his right mind ever took him to be the demented clown being portrayed now.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

The REAL President Nixon pacing the grounds of the White House in 1973.

Beyond letting us watch a great actor portraying someone we knew too long and perhaps too well, "Nixon" does not make much sense on its own. You almost have to have been there to understand resonant conceits like Maureen Dean's hairdo, or a flashed photograph of J. Robert Oppenheimer, or Nixon secluded in a room in front of a blazing fireplace with the air-conditioning on full blast.

With numerous teases hinting at a great Nixon secret, Stone promises us a Rosebud, something having to do with the assassination of somebody. Fidel Castro? John Kennedy? Robert Kennedy? We never know for sure. That story line erodes, and Nixon has another Scotch.

Sitting through a preview screening of "Nixon" made me think that too much of a fuss may have been made of Stone's dangerous cinematic brilliance in "JFK" In "Nixon," the use of grainy film, quick cutting and deliberately misleading pseudo-documentary techniques seems flatter and flatter because the film has more point of view than point.

What started a national shouting match four years ago was separate from Oliver Stone's mastery of the mysterious powers of cinema. It was not how Stone said it in "JFK" but what he said. He said and marketed the idea that there was a conspiracy at the highest levels of American government to murder a president.

This time, with "Nixon," it is clear that all the Shakespearean pretensions and cinematic pyrotechnics in the world have very little impact if you have nothing much to say.

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