

Liberties

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Nix 'Nixon' — Tricky Pix

WASHINGTON

I thought Oliver Stone might go all the way, and have Anthony Hopkins play Nixon as Hannibal Lecter.

Imagine Nixon in the Oval Office, listening to the "Goldberg Variations" and savoring the prospect of eating John Dean's liver with some fava beans and a nice Chianti.

Or perhaps a scene where he smiles frostily and sends his valet Manolo Sanchez to fetch an impudent Bordeaux from the White House wine cellar. He is having Bob Woodward for lunch.

But Oliver Stone wanted to make a sympathetic movie about a kindred paranoid spirit. "It's a film that heals," he said from his car phone. "That's why we play 'Shenandoah' at the end." So he does not present Nixon as a cannibalistic psychopath. He merely portrays him as a pill-popping, Scotch-swilling, impotent madman haunted by his role in C.I.A. plots to assassinate Castro that got out of control and killed J.F.K.

(The mind reels that Alexander Haig is the most serene character in the movie.)

Eván Thomas, the author of "The Very Best Men," a history of the early C.I.A., says that his interviews and research into classified documents showed that Nixon had no role in C.I.A. assassination plots, and added that it would be laughable to accuse the C.I.A. of killing Kennedy, if so many people didn't believe it, thanks to Mr. Stone.

Roger Stone, keeper of the Nixon flame, wearily notes: "Scotch wasn't even Nixon's drink. He made a mean martini, though. He'd say,

Stone and Nixon, two of a kind.

"Do you want a silver bullet?"

Never mind that Oliver Stone has relied on speculation for his "Rosebud," as he calls his antihero's obsession with the assassination plots. Many critics are hailing "Nixon" as a new "Citizen Kane." Newsweek gushed: "The propagandist has been replaced by a bold portraitist."

At a reception with the bold portraitist after a screening of "Nixon" at the Kennedy Center, Bob Woodward observed, "I guess everybody gets the psychoanalyst they deserve, and Nixon got Oliver Stone."

Perhaps every society gets the mythmaker it deserves as well. A culture that confuses celebrity with value, historical knowledge with repressed memory, gets Mr. Stone.

After the storm over "JFK," in which the director implied that Lyndon Johnson and the C.I.A. were part of a conspiracy about President Kennedy's death, Mr. Stone is trying to have it both ways. Wanting to be seen as historically scrupulous, he hired Nixon aides as consultants and published a script with footnotes.

But when asked about some blatant twisting of fact, he falls back on the argument that it's just a movie. "It's a Nixon," he told USA Today. "It's not the Nixon." (That's like saying, "I am not a crook," as

opposed to "I am not the crook.")

After you've seen enough "documentary replacements," as Mr. Stone calls his morphing of actors with real footage — Mr. Hopkins debating Kennedy and pointing his finger at Khrushchev — it just looks like any Nixon.

Hollywood has always mixed entertainment and history. In "Night and Day," Cary Grant played Cole Porter as a devout heterosexual.

But Mr. Stone does not sugarcoat. He poison-coats, mixing fact and propaganda with such skill that millions of impressionable moviegoers are left believing that there has been nothing but Manichean darkness at the top. His talent as a film maker does not make the situation better. Artful falsehood is more dangerous than artless falsehood, because fewer people will see through it.

He gloms on to whole big sections of recent history and filters everything through one unproven prism: that J.F.K. wanted to withdraw from Vietnam, and that he was murdered for it by The System.

In 1992, some Times reporters had coffee with Nixon. He analyzed the political landscape, predicting that the Iraqgate scandal wouldn't harm George Bush, unless there were incriminating tapes.

"And I know something about tapes," he murmured drily. Poor Nixon — all those tapes, with all those juicy quotes and all that drama and wickedness, and still Hollywood gets it wrong.

Oh, for the day when we won't have Oliver Stone to kick around anymore. □