

Nixon's tragedy isn't Stone's melodrama

By PAUL GREENBERG

He's back.

At the funeral, when Bob Dole said the second half of the 20th century would be known as the Age of Nixon, it may not have been just the usual hyperbole on a state occasion. In the train of ever-newer Nixons, the newest is Oliver Stone's — bigger 'n' life and it seems to go on twice as long. One emerges from Oliver Stone's darkness newly thankful for the healing '80s and Ronald Reagan — who didn't know nearly so much as Richard Nixon, but believed so much more.

Nixon belongs to the '90s. They were made for him, or maybe he made them. The recurrent references to congressional subpoenas, to an overblown scandal that would never be traced to the president, to the usefulness of attorney-client privilege, to the siege mentality at the White House. The movie seemed less about history than about current events. One half-expected Al D'Amato's face to appear on the screen any time; he would have fit right in.

If the strange plunges into his obsessions didn't interrupt Stone's art so regularly, the movie's recurrent inaccuracies would:

■ Nobody ever called Pat Nixon "Buddy" except maybe as a child. When the script calls for Richard Nixon to address her that way, any willing suspension of disbelief is shattered cold.

■ Helen Gahagan Douglas was not a senator.

■ Herb Klein did not try to persuade Nixon to contest the results of the 1960 presidential election — quite the contrary.

No one else seems to recall Richard Nixon reeling in a haze of alcohol and drugs. His daytime drug was caffeine and, of course, power. When he did imbibe, it was martinis — not bourbon. Stone couldn't even get the drink right. By all accounts, Richard Nixon was the most frighteningly sober of men. Some of us always thought he might have done better if he had indulged himself more.

Whatever the 37th president's problems, surely his obsessions and delusions never reached the depth and frequency of Oliver Stone's. The filmmaker is still obsessing about Fidel Castro and JFK's assassination, like some bore who's got you cornered at a party. But the real secret at the core of "Nixon" is that Oliver Stone likes Richard Nixon, con-

fuses him with a tragic hero, believes that the life and times of Richard M. Nixon represent the human condition or at least the American condition. The director seems in love with violence, corruption, conspiracy, gangster machismo ... temporal power in all its tawdrier aspects.

Yes, there is something poignant (but scarcely tragic) about the life and times of Richard Nixon. But it's already been captured — in John Adams' opera, "Nixon in China" — and without the heavy ideology.

And yet, and yet ... reviewers keep using the adjective Shakespearean to describe the scenes at court, and it's inevitable. Those scenes set in the Oval Office do have a fascination, a believability at least in spirit, that makes it worth sitting through all the psycho-socio-political schlock.

Much of the acting is fine. Anthony Hopkins doesn't so much act as imitate. He must have immersed himself in Nixon tapes. The timbre, the enunciation, could have been taken off the newsreels. As a friend commented, anyone who had not seen that mechanical, transparently phony, easy-on, easy-off, yes, Nixonian smile in what seemed like a thousand campaigns would never have believed Hopkins' rendition. But there it is.

Joan Allen's Pat Nixon reminds one of why so many of us admired her — her gallantry, her sense of duty, her dedication to a job she had come to hate. Mrs. Nixon never radiated any false warmth — because she didn't radiate any warmth, just a kind of searing hard-luck-kid sincerity.

In the end, no one has done a better Nixon, not even Anthony Hopkins, than Richard Nixon himself. To go back and listen to the tape of the Checkers speech, to re-hear the Kitchen Debate in which Richard Nixon now sounds right on the mark, to listen again to his disastrous press conferences in defeat, to the desperation of "I am not a crook" from someone who could conceive of only money honesty, and the "You won't have Nixon to kick around any more" routine from someone whose reserves of self-pity never ran out, is to realize again how eloquent and transparent and pathetic and heroic and unbeatable the man was.

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