1
War

Introduction

> This I feel. A curse. Mother said it more than once, 'You could be killed over there, Oliver,' as if I were incompetent, not man enough to take care of myself; I hated her motherlove arrogance. Did I listen? Did it make sense? Mothers are cowards. Curses passed down the vaginal passageways deep to man. True as true can be. I told her that I didn't really want to go back to Yale, I was an adventurer, just like her and went to Vietnam instead. But I wonder what she'll say when she finds out about this. My limbs stiffening, waiting in this groin wound of a rotten field in Vietnam.[1]

Oliver Stone penned these words, not as part of some reflective memoir of his experiences as a soldier in the Vietnam War, but immediately upon return from his first trip to Saigon in 1965 where, during a year away from his studies at Yale University, he had done nothing more dangerous than work as an English teacher in a Catholic school. US forces had begun arriving in Vietnam during that year as part of a dramatic escalation, although the ground war that would engulf American foreign policy for the next decade was not yet properly underway. Gripped with the desire to make his mark as a writer, the trip to Asia provided the raw material for Stone's first writing project: a semi-autobiographical novel that lay dormant for many years before being published in the 1990s as *A Child's Night Dream*.

The themes of suicide and death reverberate through the pages of this early writing, and it is not hard to see how the American post-Second World War psychoses of power, responsibility, guilt and redemption dictate much of Stone's thinking. Midway through the book, Stone imagines scenes of jungle combat between Americans and the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) almost as though he was wishing a destiny for himself and his nation that was already tilting towards a frightening reality. Indeed, these self-absorbed imaginings of an impressionable young student were transformed at the end of 1967 on Stone's entry into the US army, into the unforgiving reality of a stripped back infantryman who quickly had to adjust to the speed of combat, chaos of friendly fire and freezing effects of fear. The manuscript had played its part in this transformation. Its rejection for publication, along with associated criticism from his father Lou (Figure 1) about the wisdom of seeking a career as a writer, had catapulted Stone into volunteering for the army: an impulsive move fused with anger and feelings of rejection that would expose him to fourteen months of front line jungle combat.

By any standard, Stone has been a product of war: intrigued by it, physically and psychologically marked by it, propelled to action by

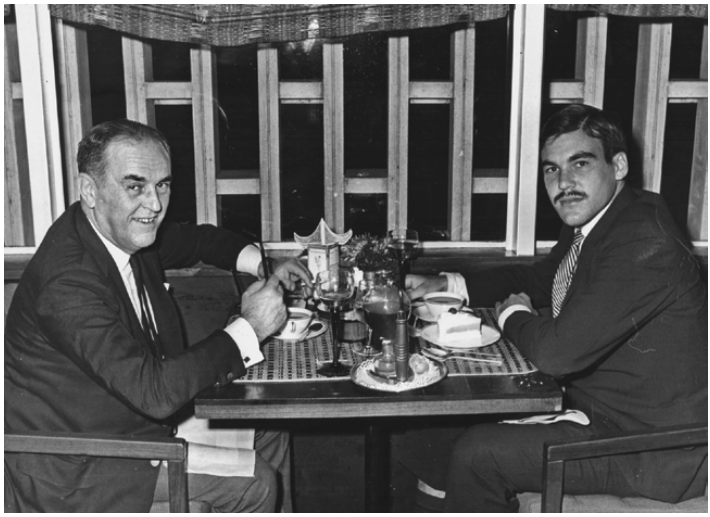

Figure 1 Lou and Oliver Stone, Hong Kong, February 1968

it, and galvanised in opposition to it. The world he grew up in – a post-war America that conspired against communism abroad, and ran scared of its shadow at home – was forged in the call to war that newspaper editor Henry Luce entreated Americans to embrace in his 1941 article, 'The American Century':

> In the field of national policy, the fundamental trouble with America has been, and is, that whereas their nation became in the 20th century the most powerful and the most vital nation in the world, nevertheless Americans were unable to accommodate themselves spiritually and practically to that fact. Hence they have failed to play their part as a world power – a failure which has had disastrous consequences for themselves and for all mankind. And the cure is this: to accept wholeheartedly our duty and our opportunity as the most powerful and vital nation in the world and in consequence to exert upon the world the full impact of our influence, for such purposes as we see fit and by such means as we see fit.[2]

To use Luce's own phrase, there is much 'brassy trumpeting' of the American condition throughout his piece. In noting that the twentieth century was America's moment of maturation, he suggested that the country was already the intellectual, scientific and artistic capital of the world. Within the hyperbole also lay the threads of an American foreign policy that, from the end of the Second World War, would have such a profound effect on the baby boomer generation to which Oliver Stone belonged. Luce lamented the 'moral and practical bankruptcy of any and all forms of isolationism', and called both to the Republican Party to shake itself free of its historical aversion to engagement, and to all Americans to support Franklin D. Roosevelt in a way that would ensure that his third term in office would be marked by a break from the isolationism of the previous eight years. The point for Luce at least was that America already had become the 'powerhouse of the ideals of Freedom and Justice' throughout the world – and it was now time to fully embrace that pre-eminence.[3]

After the Second World War, Luce's philosophy emerged in key policy statements such as the Truman Doctrine, NSC-68[4] and anti-communist ideology more generally, conditioning America to its late-twentieth century wars and infusing the central tenets of Oliver Stone's life. Unsurprisingly, his 'Vietnam trilogy' has received some of the most intensive scrutiny among all his films,

and the pictures certainly do parade Stone's preoccupations with political judgement, Cold War consensus and, of course, the nature of conflict, as much as they do his cinematic pretensions. Yet few studies have really addressed these planks of his cinematic oeuvre, much less Stone's engagement and viewpoint with the wider military and cultural consequences of the 'American Century', let alone its later manifestation suggested by the 'War on Terror'.

Stone's early life and career were dominated by the effects of Vietnam. Much later with *Nixon* (1995), Stone was still piecing together his personal and cinematic treatise on what the country and the conflict meant to himself and his fellow Americans – and his work has returned to that territory and its wider Cold War ramifications time and again. However, there has been a shift too. His post-9/11 films, *Alexander* (2004), *World Trade Center* (2006), *W.* (2008) and *Savages* (2012) also had plenty to say about war, but for the most part they said it in a more understated manner. It has been left to Stone's emerging documentary work in the 2000s to air his forthrightness. The ambitious ten-hour series, *The Untold History of the United States*, which began airing in the USA on Showtime in November 2012, and in Britain on Sky Atlantic in May 2013, was co-written with Associate Professor of English at American University, Peter Kuznick. The series and accompanying book[5] challenged conventional Cold War history and emphasised themes and facts which the authors believe had been excised or downplayed in a host of studies of the twentieth century. The themes of empire and perpetual war were important reference points in this reassessment. Therefore, as a project, *Untold History* was nothing less than a repudiation of Luce's prophecy and the corresponding call to arms and psychological hold that his 'American Century' concept had had on the nation's psyche for more than seventy years.

Despite the vehemence of this repudiation, Stone's public declarations and cinematic position on war and empire have never simply aspired to isolationism. He is not a pacifist. He does not advocate disengagement from the threat of international terrorism in the modern age, but he does see the US administration's tendency towards militaristic solutions as ultimately self-defeating. Its intelligence gathering, as events in the 2010s gave testimony to, covered an ever-increasing multitude of confusing sins. Of course,

Stone's past as a combat veteran looms large in his politics and attitude to conflict, and it is easily forgotten that this has made him a difficult target for critics who normally would lambast their adversary for a pretender's ignorance in such matters. With Stone, his military record cannot even begin to entertain such criticism.[6] Neither boastful nor contrite about this past, he has used it to construct a critique of foreign policy that no one else in Hollywood could come close to emulating.

Indeed, war is the central mantra of almost all that Stone does, in his films and life. The battle to craft images and meaning is no easier, or less challenging, than it was when he started making films, and his dogged application to the task belies nothing less than a personality forged in war. Off-set, his perspective has been affected more than any other filmmaker by a society long geared for conflict: a country that has come to know war almost as an extension of its being, from the Cold War to the 'War on Terror'. Why that should be so has been Stone's rallying call from the moment he stepped back on American soil in November 1968, and it has become an increasingly urgent question for him in the years since 9/11.

In this chapter we take as our premise that Stone's perspective on war provides a firm footing from which to interpret not just his films or the wider Hollywood machinery, but to think more carefully about the American polity and its constant, historical and reiterating focus on the mantra of war. Thus Stone's later films are examined as part of the response to 9/11 and how America has confronted twenty-first-century war, including *World Trade Center* (2006) and *W.* (2008) as well as the *Untold History* (2012) documentary series. As a first step towards that exploration, this chapter begins by revisiting *Platoon* (1986). As anchor, motivator, point of national recognition and window into Stone's preoccupations, the film remains a crucial component in any retrospective.

Platoon

In July 1976, Stone began work on a screenplay that, in time, would concretise not just his perspective on Vietnam, but his position as a filmmaker in Hollywood. It was populated almost entirely with a cast of characters and events from his period of active service

in 1967–68, and the retelling was as much an act of personal catharsis as it was any desire to speak the truth about the situation there. The immediate effect of the war on Stone was not some damascene conversion to liberal politics, but the germination of an angry disillusionment felt by many returning veterans from South-East Asia, exemplified in the 1971 march in Washington, DC by Vietnam Veterans Against the War.[7] Having abandoned attempts to record his experiences on paper – a task rendered impossible in jungle conditions – Stone had taken belatedly to photographing the country as a personal record of his time there (Figure 2). The combination of his writing and the stark imagery that he managed to capture on film triggered his imagination, and produced a dawning realisation that photography provided a bridge between internal writing processes and the outside world.[8]

Stone arrived back in the USA in November 1968, to a country changed by the war in a manner later brought to life in *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989). The clichés and stereotypes have now taken a hold in the popular imagination, but for Stone, the fallout and rehabilitation were all too real. He took a road trip through California and on into Mexico. Upon his return, he was arrested in San Diego for possession of drugs: a habit that had become near enough a way of life in his bid to put the experience of combat behind him. Stone spent two weeks in jail before managing to extricate himself with help from his father. All the while he accumulated all the firsthand evidence he could ever want to write a story of similar entrapment and extreme conditions. The jail, like Vietnam, was a breeding ground of experience for Stone that he somehow already knew how to process, and later transfer to paper and the screen. Within a decade many of the experiences of that two-week stint in a San Diego prison would help him re-enter the mind of a prisoner, as he shaped the screenplay for the award-winning *Midnight Express* (Alan Parker, 1978).

A month after returning to New York from the west coast, Stone was again living in impoverished conditions, but he had begun making short movies with a borrowed Super 8 camera. This led him to write *Break*, his first screenplay and the first one that tried to express something of the experiences of Vietnam. *Break* had much of the essence of *Platoon* played out to the sound of The Doors.[9] In other words, it was an early amalgam

Figure 2 Oliver Stone, Vietnam

of the thoughts and subject matter that in time, Stone would be able to commit to his movies. Thanks to the G.I. Bill,[10] he then found himself able to enrol in film school.[11] Luckily for Stone, New York University had not only one of the most progressive and well-regarded programmes in America; it also had, in Martin Scorsese, a tutor who himself was trying to get on the ladder of film. Scorsese became a mentor to Stone, and saw in him a kindred spirit who was equally fractious, similarly questioning, and who wanted to turn his camera on the extraneous conditions of an America that had fallen apart in the six short years since the Kennedy assassination.[12]

Unsurprisingly then, one of Stone's first attempts at filmmaking while at New York University was *Last Year in Viet Nam* (1971), which sought to capture some of the raw disillusionment of the war at home. Film was beginning to have a galvanising effect, zoning in on Stone's emotional reflexes and allowing him an outlet for the post-traumatic anxieties that were whirling around in his head. Classmates including future writing partner Stanley Weiser later reflected on a young man who was undoubtedly on the brink and even had a 'dark, dangerous edge to him'.[13] Stone himself realised that such descriptions, while possibly true, really went to the heart of the dislocation that Americans felt towards Vietnam. 'We'd

taken a fork in the road,' he said of himself and fellow veterans, but did not realise how a big a diversion it was.[14] Stone sought solace by finding a routine and then a relationship with a Lebanese-born Moroccan attaché, Najwa Sarkis, which brought stability to his life at a time when he found himself committing to his studies and discovering a talent that promised to offer a real career prospect for him.

By September 1971, Stone was married to Sarkis, had graduated from New York University, and was now working on another screenplay. *Once Too Much* still centred on Vietnam with, as he later remarked, 'an eerie parallel to Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July*.'[15] Mexico featured as a setting, just as it had for Stone on his return – but so did a tragic, downbeat ending resulting in death and loss. The war was becoming an enduring concern from which Stone could never shake himself free, even in everyday life, but he had not yet found the story that he really wanted to tell. He knew that, unlike John Wayne's *The Green Berets* (1968), he was not seeking a jingoistic redemption, but everything else had not yet fallen into place. It would not be until summer 1976, when he tried to crystallise his experiences once more, that a new screenplay emerged, titled *The Platoon*.

By this time, Stone had separated from Sarkis, and despite financial difficulties, was beginning to reintegrate with civilian life. Nevertheless, Vietnam remained an obsession. The final American retreat from the rooftop of the embassy in Saigon in April 1975 had been played out on television, and Stone was on a personal mission not simply to tell his story, but to bring to the attention of the whole American public the futility of this and all wars. From the Tet Offensive, through the bombing of Cambodia to the Paris peace accords, the mindset that had allowed so many Americans to blithely continue accepting political bromides about communism, and then watch death and destruction nightly on their television sets had, in Stone's eyes, reached its nadir in that last desperate evacuation that offered no answer to the inevitable question of what it had all been for.

The new screenplay was finished before the end of summer 1976, and immediately attracted interest from producer Marty Bregman. While Bregman could not find a studio willing to fund the film, one consequence of circulating the script within Hollywood was that

Columbia Pictures offered Stone the opportunity to write *Midnight Express*. Another consequence was that Bregman introduced Stone to Ron Kovic in July 1978, and asked him to write a story based on Kovic's bestselling memoir of two years before: *Born on the Fourth of July*.[16] That screenplay was completed too, a shooting schedule was arranged, but the deal fell through late in the day. By now, Hollywood was discovering the feel-good blockbuster mentality led by one of Stone's contemporaries, Steven Spielberg, and Vietnam was a subject that few studios wanted to tackle. Subsequent to their university days, Scorsese had got on the ladder of directing too and had managed to make a low-budget version of his own 'Vietnam screenplay', the gritty, unforgiving but critically acclaimed *Taxi Driver* (1976). However, Scorsese was swimming against the tide of an industry moving towards *Rocky* (John G. Avildsen, 1976), *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) and *Grease* (Randal Kleiser, 1978), underlining the resolve that Stone would need to make his story, or film anyone else's.

Ironically, the filmmaker that helped break the taboo about Vietnam was also the one that persuaded Stone to keep trying with his own script. In 1984, Michael Cimino offered Stone a screenwriting job adapting Robert Daley's book, *Year of the Dragon*, which had a former Vietnam veteran as its central protagonist. Just as Stone was touting *The Platoon* and meeting up with Kovic back in 1978, Cimino was putting the finishing touches to *The Deer Hunter* (1978): a breakthrough movie for which he received huge commercial and critical acclaim. However, Cimino's reputation then quickly took a huge hit with the now-infamous *Heaven's Gate* (1980), a film that was every bit as lavish and extravagant with its budget and shooting schedule as with what appeared on screen.[17] In five short years, Cimino went from the next great American director to virtually a jobbing filmmaker-for-hire. As a result he negotiated with Stone for a reduced fee for the *Year of the Dragon* screenplay, in exchange for which Cimino promised Stone that he would persuade producer Dino de Laurentiis to back *Platoon* as his next project. Through no fault of Cimino's, the deal quickly faltered.

De Laurentiis was unable to find a distributor to work with him, and in summer 1984, after Stone had scouted locations in the Philippines, the project was halted. The central problem of finding

a distributor was a very tangible one, and it revealed much of the industry's continuing attitudes towards any kind of contentious treatment of Vietnam or any recent history. Sagas of returning veterans had seen success for Cimino as well as for Hal Ashby in *Coming Home* (1978), and Francis Ford Coppola in his mesmeric *Apocalypse Now* (1979); but the trend had not really taken hold and doing a new, more realistic Vietnam story was proving a tough sell. Stone became directly involved in the *Platoon* dispute when he wrote to Eric Pleskow at Orion Pictures in August 1984:

> Your refusal to distribute 'Platoon', even with Dino guaranteeing your losses, stuns me. Your contention that the film's political content is leftist and contrary to present rightist tendencies in the country seems to me erroneous in perception.[18]

Notwithstanding Stone's frustration, in fact industry chieftains such as Pleskow were not wide of the mark in their reading of current national sentiment. With Ronald Reagan as president, as William Palmer notes, the early 1980s had been marked by a distinct shift in the reading and understanding of the Vietnam War. Films such as *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now* were harsh and unyielding but they unwittingly contributed towards a new national discourse, led by Reagan and featuring John Rambo as its Hollywood poster boy, that was tasked with reimagining the war not as defeat, but at worst as a noble cause, and at best as a misconstrued success.[19] In the face of changing national moods, Stone was confronted with the possibility of the project sitting with De Laurentiis *ad infinitum* but without sufficient leverage to get it made. The producer's refusal to proceed, and a dispute over money that Stone had spent already on the scouting trip to the Philippines, pushed him towards legal resolution in the Los Angeles Superior Court.[20]

The court action petitioned for De Laurentiis to be prevented from using the completed *Year of the Dragon* screenplay or Stone's name, and sought $5 million damages and $5 million punitive damages. Stone's trump card was that *Year of the Dragon* was only a few months away from release, and a pending court case put that release and the associated investment in jeopardy. The swiftly arranged agreement was dated 20 December 1984 and confirmed a payment from De Laurentiis to Stone of $100,000, plus expenses

of $25,000 already received. More important by far was the agreement that Stone would assume full title to *Platoon*. The final detail of that agreement was honoured on the last day of February 1985, with a request from the De Laurentiis Corporation to the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) to withdraw its registration of the title *Platoon*. Stone registered his claim with the MPAA one week later.[21]

Thus, war was elemental within Stone's emerging career and in the battle to forge a reputation and shake up the staid Hollywood routine, as he saw it. With a battle won against one of the industry's leading figures, Stone's fortunes were set to change dramatically. The unlikely saviour was a man called John Daly, an independent film producer who ran a small British company called Hemdale. While the De Laurentiis agreement was being brought to an end, Stone signed an agreement on 5 February 1985 with Arnold Kopelson's Film Packages International (FPI) to produce *Platoon*. Daly liked the screenplay he had seen, and on 18 September he confirmed to Stone that Hemdale was prepared to commit $5.5 million for the making of *Platoon*. Daly also liked something else he had seen: a screenplay about the war in El Salvador that Stone had written in the early months of 1985, based on notes from a journalist and friend, Richard Boyle. Plans to shoot *Salvador* (1986) had been built on a budget part-funded by Stone taking a loan against his New York home, but the project had stalled after initial collaboration from officials within the Salvadoran government had been withdrawn.

After Daly's confirmation of the support for *Salvador*, Stone opted to shoot that picture first, as previously planned, in Mexico. Upon completion, he moved directly on to *Platoon* in early 1986, with a return to the Philippines and a training camp for the actors. Supervised by Marine Captain Dale Dye, actors Charlie Sheen (Private Chris Taylor), Tom Berenger (Staff Sergeant Bob Barnes) Willem Dafoe (Sergeant Elias Grodin) and their colleagues spent two weeks living in the jungle, and at the end of this baptism, filming started immediately.

The narrative follows Taylor's arrival in Vietnam and his experience as a fresh recruit. He quickly finds that there are two very distinct groups within the platoon, one assembled around Staff Sergeant Barnes, who are white, working class and socially

conservative; and the other around Sergeant Grodin, who are a mix of black and white, pot-smoking, members or fellow travellers of the counterculture. The tensions that build between Barnes and Grodin were taken more or less straight from Stone's own experiences with his combat platoon, and operations such as the night ambush and hamlet scenes were close to what he had seen. Following a confrontation between Barnes and Grodin during an assault on a village, Barnes takes the opportunity in a later firefight to shoot Grodin. The latter survives, only to be killed by the NVA in open ground as the rescue helicopter saving the rest of the company pulls away. In the realisation of what has just happened Taylor resolves to kill Barnes. Following a confrontation between the two men in the final night battle scene, Taylor shoots Barnes dead.

The Barnes–Grodin battle of wills was there from the earliest versions of the screenplay, although the Christian symbolism which signposts the broader moral struggle underpinning the action was a later refinement. In the June 1977 treatment, the struggle between the two men found a resolution through Barnes giving platoon member Angel the discreet order to kill Grodin. By April 1985, the battle, now infused with religious sentiment, was much more clearly a fight for Taylor's soul: the child born of two fathers. *Platoon*'s central moral dilemma now questioned whether Taylor was simply taking the place of Barnes in seeking retribution for the death of Grodin as the narrative reaches its climax. Taylor's closing voiceover attempts no justification for the killing, but it does disavow Barnes's dubious mantle. Through Taylor, Stone voiced his own redemptive wish 'to teach to others what we know and to try with what's left of our lives to find a goodness and meaning to this life'.[22]

The desire expressed in Taylor's elegiac voiceover not to make the same mistakes over again was a mantra that Stone personally retained and, as we will explore later, one that became a key undercurrent in his later critiques of the US administration and the 'War on Terror'. The media reaction to *Platoon* covered the full spectrum of appreciation, from barbed criticism to veneration. It was a range of commentary that Stone would come to know well over the next decade. Pauline Kael of *The New Yorker* thought that Stone was on Barnes' side and simply getting high on war.[23] Others,

such as Roger Ebert at the *Chicago Sun-Times*, saw the necessity of such a film in helping Americans understand the loss of life in the war.[24] Some criticism surely would have been more stinging, had it not been for Stone's status as a veteran – for this was no personal, psychedelic exploration of violence. Rather, *Platoon* orchestrated its violence in often random, almost nonsensical patterns that attuned it to the rhythm and discontinuities of fighting. Extended periods of inactivity and routine patrols are followed by swift bouts of extreme and discordant confrontation, searching for an enemy that was, as Taylor opines, within the GIs themselves most often. Amid this 'swirling confusion' and 'surreal experience', as Lawrence Lichty and Raymond Carroll would have it, Stone tried to fashion a broader critique of US power and institutional breakdown.[25] The real violence, he wanted to say, was arranged by government and exacted upon a series of nation states whose crime had been to show ideological tendencies incompatible with American global, hegemonic aims. The Academy, at least, was sure that he had hit the mark, and recognised his efforts with the Oscar for Best Director.

What was lost in the hyperbole and subsequent huge public embrace of the film – and what, to a significant degree, has remained understated in later assessments of Stone – was the importance of *Salvador* as a companion piece to *Platoon* in the overall narrative of his career. Stone had grabbed people's attention with his visceral depiction of war, testified to by reports of veterans leaving cinemas in tears, having been so affected by the Vietnam he presented on-screen (Figure 3). Moreover, the enormous financial success of the film moved Stone into a different league in Hollywood. What was less well observed was the political critique that was abundant in the earlier film. *Salvador*'s critical depiction opened the way towards new appreciations of Central America and the USA's role in the region. For example, following Stone's film, his erstwhile producer Ed Pressman – at the same time as working on *Wall Street* – helped British director Alex Cox realise his punkish biopic, *Walker* (1987), which compressed American meddling in Nicaragua in the 1980s with imperialist William Walker's adventures there a century earlier.[26]

Equally influential then, in their own ways, *Salvador* and *Platoon* laid the foundations for Stone's subsequent assault on

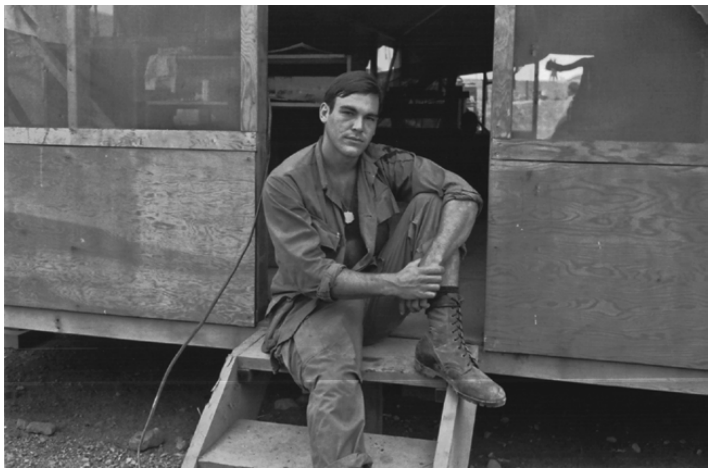

Figure 3 Oliver Stone, First Cavalry Unit, Vietnam, August 1968

the establishment. With a much higher profile, *Platoon* was the all-encompassing battle; but *Salvador* helped order that battle. Together, they established a foothold for Stone's political intent. The targets became Wall Street, the media and the entertainment industry, but Stone never really left Vietnam after that initial foothold had been carved out. Three years after *Platoon*, it was no surprise that he would return to the conflict with a film that mixed the personal, the political and the generational all together.

Born on the Fourth of July and *Heaven on Earth*

As well as anchoring his career, *Platoon*'s core contrast between Barnes and Grodin also prefigured the transition that Stone would later experience: from the full-on combative turbulence that had infused more or less everything from *Salvador* to *Natural Born Killers* (1995), to a more reflective self – one searching less for answers to personal questions, than for explanations about the broader condition of the country. In the midst of that personal transition, the nation, with Hollywood in tow, reasserted its hegemony in the post-Vietnam era. American global strategy was made manifest in a series of interventions in Haiti, Panama, Somalia and the Balkans in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Most notable was the

incursion into Kuwait and Iraq, where live-action news feeds of missiles closing in on their targets became the visual motif of this new panoptic military ascendancy. The advocates of this reinvented interventionist stance also found a supporting cultural narrative in the discourses fuelled by the substantial fiftieth anniversary commemorations of the D-Day landings during the decade. The 'good war' doctrine had its historical antecedents and modern day equivalency, the argument suggested.

However in 1989, when Stone released *Born on the Fourth of July*, the possibilities for a different kind of American late century seemed more feasible. The film was an obvious companion piece to *Platoon*, and even shared similar funding difficulties. Stone had planned to shoot the film in 1979 after his initial meeting and work with Kovic, but that option had fallen through. More surprising for Stone was the discovery some ten years later, following in the wake of *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket* (Stanley Kubrick, 1987), that few in Hollywood seemed prepared to contemplate a further Vietnam movie. However, as with *Platoon*, Stone's persistence eventually carried him through: senior executives at Universal saw the potential, and provided backing.

The plot explored the personal trauma endured by Kovic and his family as they came to terms with his injuries sustained during the war. Over ten years in gestation, the story never lost its resonance for Stone. Kovic had been a marine and volunteer like him who had signed up entirely in support of his government, and who then had been radicalised by his experiences. Becoming a vehement opponent of the war, Kovic was the real deal for Stone: a committed patriot who had embraced the 'American Century' philosophy, only to find a country largely indifferent to the personal price he had paid – and the price was significant. Stone acknowledged in particular that the way he dealt with Kovic's impotence made it a difficult film for many Americans to watch.[27]

However, critics were once again impressed. Vincent Canby at the *New York Times* wrote that this was the 'most ambitious non-documentary film yet made about the entire Vietnam experience', concluding that it did a better job than *Coming Home* (Hal Ashby, 1978) or *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1979).[28] The public agreed. The film grossed more than $70 million at the US box office ($160 million worldwide), and was nominated for eight

Oscars, with Stone taking the Best Director award, and David Brenner and Joe Hutshing winning for Best Editing. From the nostalgic confines of small town Massapequa in the 1950s, to the sensory assault on Kovic of the war, to the Bronx veterans' hospital that he was returned to, and his later odyssey through the south-west and Mexico, then on to the anti-war political campaigns of the 1970s, Kovic's Homeric journey is wholly intended as the journey of America through turbulent times. As nostalgic and sentimental as the early scenes were – and a number of critics accused Stone of 'bombast'[29] – the contrast with Kovic's later predicament and his railing at the world could not be sharper or tauter. In *Born on the Fourth of July*, Stone found a way to make his Vietnam experience universal: a moral of the Cold War era, a lesson for American futures. The film was much acclaimed and has stood the test of time. However, American military actions in Iraq just a year later belied any lessons learned, and in fact would bring a reversal in popular assessments of war and America's place in the world.

Born on the Fourth of July had captured something in the national psyche, and a fascination with the American condition among audiences further afield, that confirmed Stone's 'Midas touch' during these years. In conjunction with *Platoon*, the two films had exposed the 'Vietnam Syndrome'[30] on film for a nation still prepared for self-examination, and the result was compelling and traumatic for all concerned – but Stone was not done with the subject. The two movies had been about America; in other words, what Vietnam War films had been solely about for more than twenty years. However, Stone had not told the story of the Vietnamese yet. In 1993, his trilogy was completed with *Heaven and Earth*, a film directly addressing the consequences of the conflict for the Vietnamese population, but Stone found himself in territory that the audience did not wish to travel to with him. The photography is lush, and the performance of the central character Le Ly Hayslip (Hiep Thi Le) is full of pathos as she undertakes a journey that sees the disintegration of her family, community, country and, ultimately, life. Bound still by the all-enveloping influence of America, Le Ly's story is complicated by her love for gunnery sergeant, Steve Butler (Tommy Lee Jones). Their life in America promises idyllic recompense for the horrors of the war, but Butler's memories are too immediate, and

the nightmares too overpowering. Tragedy ensues, and the film finds only crumbs of hope in a future of uncertainty for Le Ly and her family at the end.

In the space between *Born on the Fourth of July* and *Heaven and Earth*, the first Gulf War had driven a wedge into the American psyche. During the period of formal hostilities, German reunification had been concluded in October 1990. The troubling lessons from Vietnam had been overwritten with a sense of self-confidence that laid the foundations for a new, more assertive US foreign policy stance, upon which groups such as the Project for the New American Century would expound later. War, it seemed, was no longer about existential threat, but had become something of a video game. America was now ready, even eager, to forget Vietnam completely and, along with it, any cautionary lessons about empire. The goal, as Colin Harrison argues assessing that decade of the 1990s, was 'the restoration of national pride, erasing the memory of a previous ignominious defeat'.[31] Stone's invitation to empathise with the plight of a nation which had paid heavily for its role as a proxy during the Cold War was dismissed out of hand. The film grossed less than $6 million at the US box office, and was Stone's first true commercially disappointing return.

The three films provided a series of perspectives on war that acknowledged heroism and sacrifice in a multitude of guises, but which remained unequivocal in their anti-war sentiment. Often, Stone was criticised for this, but the juxtaposition of the themes is natural and important. Heroism only meant survival, and Stone's own experiences had told him that. 'Good wars' were never really good, only necessary. One of Stone's resonant quotes from Edmund Burke – used as the opening prologue in *JFK* (1991) – pointed out how evil triumphs when good men do nothing. Stone's 'good' men and women in these films were Taylor, Kovic, and Le Ly: each one confronting violence, each overcoming adversity, and each learning the lesson that life's constant fight is to find peace in the flames of war – even long after that war is over. If *Heaven and Earth* appeared darker than its companions, more corrupted as a piece by the implacability of Vietnam, it was because Stone's own political perspective on the war and all that followed it had hardened, just as the country was settling into a less questioning and more self-satisfied cultural zeitgeist.

The contrasting reception that each of the movies had, but especially the last of the trilogy, charted the gulf that was opening up between Stone and some of his audience. The country was heading back to the conservative-centre ground in the 1990s, with Hollywood in tow. Economic growth was mounting under the new Clinton administration, the post-Cold War dividend seemed open to speculation, and mainstream cultural predilections were finding favour in the disposable history of *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994), the vanquishing of aliens in *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996) and more generally in the blockbuster franchises of *Jurassic Park* (1993–2015) and *Batman* (1989–2012). The shift was confirmed for Stone by both the commercial failure of *Nixon* (1995) as well as the controversy generated by *Natural Born Killers*.

In fact, *Natural Born Killers* was not entirely on its own as cultural commentary in these years. In the approach to, and aftermath of, the Rodney King episode in Los Angeles in 1991–92,[32] and the riots that followed, grainier and more culturally synonymous product was arising that took 'war' back home. From Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and John Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), through Joel Schumacher's *Falling Down* (1993) to the violence of Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994), American society, race, class, social position and exclusion were being exposed in forms that were as visceral as Stone's cinema, but with themes that he had rarely approached in his career thus far. What was clear was that broader questions about conflict, empire and US foreign policy failure were no longer as interesting to producers or mainstream audiences. However, events within a decade gave Stone a way back in to put his position on 'war'.

The 'War on Terror'

American interest in war was revived during the 1990s as part of a collective recollection of just war, defence of freedom and justice that accompanied the fiftieth anniversary D-Day commemorations: sentiments that would slide seamlessly into the post-9/11 narrative on global terror. The groundwork for this new discourse had been mapped out by the Project for the New American Century, in a report on American global military dominance published in September 2000 that later attracted notoriety for its comment

that military transformation would be slow unless some catalysing 'Pearl Harbor' event were to befall the USA.[33] One year later, the prophetic assertion came to devastating and tragic fruition.

Hollywood caught the emerging national mood very quickly. As Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard rightly point out, the film colony had used the late 1970s and 1980s as a moment to critically evaluate recent US military history and philosophy. By the 1990s its focus had changed to the Second World War, with its subscript of 'just war' and ripe populist and popular cultural sentiment, typified by Steven Spielberg's award-winning *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). Patriotically and historically mangled though it may have been, Michael Bay's *Pearl Harbor* (2001) was no less popular, and revisited cinemas to much fanfare in the aftermath of 9/11.[34]

In the immediate 9/11 moment, a number of other films also began to engage with complex narratives that promulgated the 'good war', dedicated to notions of liberation, freedom, nation-building and moral superiority, and which inadvertently or otherwise became de rigueur as cultural bulwarks of the Bush administration's agenda. Using classical moorings, the nobility and romance of conflict was reaffirmed in *Troy* (Wolfgang Petersen, 2004), *Kingdom of Heaven* (Ridley Scott, 2005) and *300* (Noam Murro, 2006). Just war sentiments and heightened realism were visible in Clint Eastwood's retelling of the battle for Iwo Jima in *Flags of our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (both 2006), while Sam Mendes' first Gulf War story, *Jarhead* (2005), conveyed the tedium of war in all its stilted fashion. Several Hollywood directors tried to grapple more directly with political aspects of the 'War on Terror', including Stephen Gaghan with *Syriana* (2005), Gavin Hood's *Rendition* (2007), Ridley Scott investigating CIA intelligence-gathering in *Body of Lies* (2008), and Paul Greengrass deconstructing the controversial search for weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) in *Green Zone* (2010). Of these, the only film to recover its budget at the US box office was *Syriana*: a surprisingly ambitious narrative effort that used multiple storylines and characters to construct a web of infiltration and deceit, linking US foreign policy to the worldwide battle and demand for oil reserves. These films engaged with terrorism, the psychological effects of combat and the role of intelligence agencies, but they also provided a crucial backdrop to Stone's work during the same period.

Stone's on-screen response both to 9/11 and the resurgence of Luce's 'American Century' vision in the project for a new century were seen to varying degrees in *Alexander* (2004), *World Trade Center* and *W. Alexander* had been conceived prior to 9/11, although the heated debate that it aroused was less about the film's post-9/11 allegorical tone than it was about the portrayal of the eponymous military campaigner as bisexual. Exploring the psychology of a young man who had quickly asserted his authority as a fighting general, the film follows an ascendency that was consolidated with the taking of Persia in 331 BCE. After embarking on the Persian expedition, Alexander never returned to his homeland and, in the absence of reliable historical sources, his exact motivations and goals can only be speculated. He died in Babylon in 323 BCE with his ultimate vision unknown.[35] While Stone was drawing in no way a direct comparison between George W. Bush and Alexander, the latter's campaign in Persia obviously called to mind the implications of the Iraq invasion in 2003, as the director later reflected. In a response to a letter from Jack Valenti in December 2004, about the reception of *Alexander* in the USA, Stone asked simply:

> What is going on with America? I can't help but feel it is, in its way, isolated from history. I haven't seen any commentary on the film that brings out the eerie parallels in that Alexander did what George Bush is trying to do first and better.[36]

A number of US reviewers never found their way to contemporary events through the film either, but that was not true of everyone. The *New York Times* first saw the picture as alluding to Stone himself, offering no direct equation with Iraq.[37] However, writing in the same paper two days later, Emily Eakin observed that:

> For a politically ascendant America at war far from home, the story of the region's most famous conqueror has irresistible allure. Liberator, dictator, uniter, divider, visionary, murderer, empire-builder, oppressor, idealist, feminist, multiculturalist, sexist, racist, gay, straight, bisexual: Alexander is today all this and more. Infinitely malleable and all-encompassing, auspicious allegory and cautionary tale, his story is tailor-made for the new world order.[38]

Whether he took such plaudits to heart or not, Stone did plot a direct dramatic engagement with the post 9/11 crisis after

Alexander, and it came first with *World Trade Center* and then *W.* If reviewers missed or were simply uninterested in *Alexander*'s political allusion, the anticipation felt by the time that *World Trade Center* went into production five years on from 9/11 was clear for all to see.

World Trade Center

The 9/11 Commission Report was issued on 22 July 2004. Running to some 567 pages, it attempted to provide a full account of:

> the facts and circumstances relating to the terrorist attacks of 11 September, 2001 including those relating to intelligence and law enforcement agencies, diplomacy, immigration issues and border control, the flow of assets to terrorist organisations, commercial aviation, the role of congressional oversight and resource allocation, and other areas determined by the Commission.[39]

The Commission's forty-one recommendations dealt with foreign relations and the need to show moral leadership to the rest of the world, as well as more specific findings related to emergency response, border security and reporting lines within the various intelligence agencies. In measured, even muted language, the Commission recommended that the 'War on Terror' could not concern itself merely with military responses, concluding that 'if we favour one tool while neglecting others, we leave ourselves vulnerable and weaken our national effort'.[40]

The message about moral leadership was thrown into sharp relief immediately on publication. Just a few weeks earlier in May 2004, investigative journalist Seymour Hersh had published a detailed account of the treatment of detainees by the US army at the Abu Ghraib detention centre in Baghdad: a series of revelations that produced international outrage and a major public relations crisis for the Bush administration.[41]

The balanced response that the Commission was seeking appeared lost on the administration, but nevertheless, the report's core content was compelling. At its heart was a detailed and harrowing account of events inside the towers of the World Trade Center from the time at which the first plane struck the North Tower, to the point 102 minutes later when both towers had collapsed in on themselves. The Commission's account included details of the

efforts of the first responders on the scene, including personnel from the Fire Department, Port Authority and Police Department.

The Commission's narrative of that morning was also the central pivot in Stone's *World Trade Center*, released in the USA almost two years later on 9 August 2006. *World Trade Center* took as its focus the true story of the survival of two Port Authority police officers: John McLoughlin (Nicolas Cage) and Will Jimeno (Michael Peña). They entered the North Tower lobby just as the South Tower collapsed and were trapped in the debris. Two of their colleagues were killed during this incident, and a third died after the North Tower in which they were trapped also later collapsed. Eventually, McLoughlin and Jimeno were found and rescued several hours later.

Support from the Port Authority Police Department was secured in August 2005, and filming commenced in mid-October with a budget set at $63 million. To avoid any potential upset during filming, much of the work was done in Los Angeles, with only limited location shooting over a four-week period in Manhattan. In terms of dramatic structure, Stone organised the narrative around several scenes with McLoughlin and Jimeno trapped in the collapsed buildings, intercut with family and friends scenes and the efforts of rescuers. Each scene in the hole was shorter than its predecessor, a conscious effort to avoid overloading the audience with darkness on the screen. Cutting to the families allowed for moments piecing together their lives, but the sense of confusion and fear about what has happened is retained in scenes involving the rescuers, as it is increasingly with the families. Details from McLoughlin's and Jimeno's accounts of the entire incident were used wherever possible, and these included Jimeno's telling recollection of a vision of Christ at one point.

Inevitably, the filming raised many contentious issues. Stone was drawn to the rescue, and wanted to tell that story without getting dragged into the wider political debates about 9/11 then in full swing. He was also alert to media reports about his involvement in a 9/11 film – and not without justification. In May 2003, conservative websites had been debating a boycott of Disney as a result of the announcement that Miramax (then owned by Disney) would support Michael Moore's planned documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004). Disney buckled, and Moore's film was only rescued

by Harvey and Bob Weinstein who bought out Disney's interest and then, with help from Lionsgate, successfully distributed the film. Stone was all too aware then that a movie of that day had pressures of recollection, authenticity and vested interest with which to contend.

Stone saw in *World Trade Center* a story that was personal, courageous, committed and that did not need political controversies to get in the way of McLoughlin and Jimeno's astonishing feat of survival. Stone sidestepped the wider political debate and opted for as much authenticity as the film could muster. He was wary of sentimentality, and it was a fine line to walk. Both McLoughlin and Jimeno were involved in script reviews that ensured accuracy, but they inevitably brought their own sensitivities, which occasionally lessened some aspects of the dramatic tension. For example, in a January 2006 script review, Jimeno was concerned about the impact of a particular scene on the widow of a former colleague, and asked for two script changes.[42]

The release and marketing of the film brought further worries. Initially, Paramount Studios had proposed 11 August (8/11) for release, apparently to avoid any suggestion that they were exploiting the actual date of the attack. Stone objected, seeing that choice as equally insensitive, and the release date was brought forward by two days. The general vigilance concerning the risks of bad publicity even extended to a decision to avoid a suggestion, first made by Moritz Borman, that the production team might capitalise on the publicity for *United 93* (Paul Greengrass, 2006) by arranging a television debate between Stone and Greengrass. Fellow producer Michael Shamberg felt that rather than seeking closer association, the differences between each movie were better emphasised.[43]

Stone's dramatic line for his movie reaped some dividends in the mainstream and conservative press. In a pre-release article, the *Wall Street Journal* described the film as 'not the usual Stone conspiracy project'.[44] A review carried by *USA Today* commented that *World Trade Center* was 'a powerful film without any discernible agenda'.[45] The *Los Angeles Times* gave some insight into what the 'absence of agenda' issue might mean, when it surmised that the film had been embraced by right-wing commentators because of its pro-American, pro-family, pro-faith, pro-male orientation.[46] Stone's decision to focus on a story about individual endurance and

heroism, rather than offering any explicit wider political perspective, had wrong-footed some critics for sure. A *Washington Times* editorial typified the response. Recalling earlier descriptions of Stone in the paper as a 'conspiracy-addled director with a soft spot for dictators', they now announced: 'It is with the greatest regret that we recall those words. For with "World Trade Center", Mr. Stone has made a truly great movie.'[47] David Edelstein, writing in *New York* magazine, seemed to sum up the incongruous responses from many observers. Stone was praised for the understated nature of the film: 'No speed-freak editing. No lefty tub-thumping. No conspiracy theories. Just a celebration of American valor in the face of devastation.'[48] However, the same article concluded by observing that Stone had chosen a strange time to be apolitical, confirming the real burden that the mainstream American media had placed on the director's shoulders. Stone's glowing reviews for a straight-line picture seemed tinged with disappointment that the conspiracist bogeyman had not behaved to type.

Other details in the press coverage of *World Trade Center* posed different issues for Stone. Several reviewers questioned the veracity of details within the rescue sequence at the end of the film.[49] Indeed, in the immediate aftermath and later, conflicting reports remained of who exactly did what and at what point. Of more concern to Stone were suggestions that in effect he had worked as a hired hand for Paramount, reined in by some of the other contributors about how the film's plot should progress. In the *New York Times* review, A. O. Scott suggested that Andrea Berloff's screenplay had 'impose[d] a salutary discipline on some of the director's wilder impulses'.[50]

In fact, Stone had raised the issue of writing credits with Shamberg and co-producer Stacey Sher. In a letter dated 13 July 2006, Stone reported that in recent interviews with the *New York Times, Dateline* and *Newsweek* he had been asked questions that indicated someone had spoken to the journalists beforehand, giving them the perception that Stone had loved the screenplay so much that he shot it as it was. Stone made clear in the letter that he was not happy about this suggestion of being a 'hired director'. He added that while he was content not to pursue writing credits or money, and while he was keen to support the career of a new writer, he wanted to state clearly that he was closely involved in reworking

the script a year before release.[51] The production files suggest that Berloff's original script had a detailed grasp of the material, while Stone's input in several revisions of the screenplay were to do with dramatic structuring, including merging scenes to provide key narrative information in shorter times. Revisions had been made as far back as November 2004 as well as summer 2005, and a final version dated 14 September 2005 was used by Paramount for legal clearance.[52]

As the file designation for this copy of the screenplay in Ixtlan's production files indicates, this was not the only screenplay that Stone was working on that summer. During this period he held meetings with writer Kevin Elders on a project titled *War on Terror*. On the face of it, this looked more like the kind of film that Stone might have been expected to make. *War on Terror* told the story of the investigation of a terrorist cell in the USA, focusing on the arrest and disappearance of a dentist. The story's political perspective was everything that *World Trade Center* was not, looking in depth at CIA actions after 9/11 and the US government's difficulties in Afghanistan and Iraq. The screenplay also touched on the Patriot Act of 2001, and the US's relationship with Iran. Stone and Elders held script meetings in August 2005, and Elders provided a revised draft of the story at the end of September. Stone eventually sent a finished version of the document to Brian Lourd at Creative Artists Agency in February 2006, seeking guidance on who might be interested in funding such a project – there was no one. Stone understood that the story offered an ideological challenge to the Bush administration's orthodoxy. However, at the beginning of 2006, the criticism and unease about American foreign policy was still not sufficient enough to entice backers into pledging support for such a film, while there remained a lack of popular and establishment criticism. A year later, much would change, but Stone had already shot *World Trade Center* and moved on.

In this period Stone acquired the rights to *Jawbreaker*, a book by Gary Bernsten,[53] a CIA operative responsible for coordinating some of the agency's efforts in Afghanistan and the initial hunt for Osama Bin Laden. Stone described Bernsten as a 'real hardcore, right-wing operative', but he was interested in the story for what it said about the Pentagon's failure to support the CIA at Tora Bora, where initially Bin Laden was believed to be.[54] The story of an

all-American hero resonated here, but so too did controversies surrounding government failure and inaction. However, unlike *War on Terror*, *Jawbreaker* looked for a time like it might get studio backing from Paramount. Stone later reflected that he probably would have made a hero out of Bernsten and possibly been criticised for that.[55] In the end, no deal was done and the Bin Laden manhunt would take another five years, while Hollywood's dramatisation of that tale would arrive in 2012 with Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty*. Stone saw dramatic possibilities in all three screenplays that he looked at in 2005, but emotion and politics ran high at the time, and Stone thought that *World Trade Center* was the story he could tell best at that moment, even if it did seem to be anchored within mainstream national narratives about 9/11.

Certainly, the ideological centre of gravity in *World Trade Center* embraced many of the attributes highlighted by the *Los Angeles Times* review: pro-American, pro-family, pro-faith and pro-male. The rescue scene in which one of the marines, Dave Karnes (Michael Shannon), declares that good men would be needed to avenge the attack was read by some as jingoism sanctioned by Stone. There was also religious symbolism, with the recital of prayers by McLoughlin as well as Jimeno's vision and his mother-in-law's praying. These elements led David Holloway to see the film in the wider context of 9/11 representations as 'mawkish and cliché-ridden'.[56] However, Stone had committed to working with the recorded details as verified by the people who were there. Karnes did return to Iraq for two tours of duty. Jimeno did recount some kind of vision. Undoubtedly the buried Port Authority officers are male, but their wives Donna McLoughlin (Maria Bello) and Allison Jimeno (Maggie Gyllenhaal) are neither sidelined as a result of this concentrated action in the rubble of the towers, nor are they simpering women – as Stone often was accused of sanctioning. Both performances seem to project the same kind of courage that Stone was looking for in the portrayal of the lead characters. Far from constructing a conventional paternalistic discourse, Stone reminded critics and audiences that conservatives did not have an exclusive franchise on pro-American, pro-family values. *Platoon* had made essentially the same point. Stone did not want to politicise the film, but he felt that the story of the day naturally led to the question of what happened afterwards with the 'War on Terror'.

In one way, the picture operates similarly to *Platoon* as a war film. It was just that Stone saw *World Trade Center* as a working-class view of a different kind of combat. The audience is thrust into the epicentre of the action, but without the narrative conventions of some structured rescue operation to provide context and exposition. Instead, the various family and rescue stories are pieced together slowly. Jimeno and McLoughlin are removed from the hole, but no larger examination of the day is brought forth. Thus, views are constricted in a similar manner to *Platoon*: a close-quarters depiction of pain, courage and fear without the all-enveloping geopolitical causation. Taylor's and McLoughlin's voiceovers at the end of each film sought goodness and meaning to the events portrayed, stressing how compassion and community can still outshine madness and destruction. Two different environments with the same essential meaning; but what had changed between the two films was an embedded neo-conservative ideology forged in the Reagan-era of the 1980s, now led by George W. Bush's administration.

W.

The front page of the *New York Times* on 5 November 2008 ran a single word headline: 'Obama', and subtitled it 'Racial Barrier Falls in Heavy Turnout'.[57] Barack Obama's election as the forty-fourth president had electrified metropolitan centres on the east and west coasts. The election marked the conclusion of George W. Bush's eight years in the White House: eight years that seemed as contentious as they were long. As Jeffrey Toobin recounts, the administration began in a tumult of vote recounts in Florida, and the eventual intervention of the Supreme Court to assert that Bush had a legal and constitutional claim on the office.[58] Any semblance of subsequent calm that might have begun to settle on the presidency after that noisy start was removed forever, not just by the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, but by the subsequent controversies over Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib and elsewhere, the misuse of intelligence in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, and fabrication of the public case for WMDs, as well as the reconstruction debacle that unfolded in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein. Through it all, Bush had retained the presidency in 2004. However, when domestic

controversy intervened – namely the sluggish, some said absent, reaction to Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, which destroyed large swathes of New Orleans and Louisiana – Bush's approval ratings plummeted in his second term, driven further down by the insurgency in Iraq that made the US mission anything but accomplished from 2005 to 2008.

In the midst of the administration's decline, in April 2007, a draft screenplay titled *Bush* had been completed by Stone and his long-term collaborator, Stanley Weiser. The two had been classmates at New York University, and Weiser had later worked with Stone on *Wall Street*. In spring 2007, Stone's mind was wandering towards the legacy of Bush and what sort of a place America had come to be in the six years since 9/11. However, cinematically it was not his prime focus. Stone was actually concluding preparations for the shooting of *Pinkville*, a story about the massacre of Vietnamese civilians by US forces at Mỹ Lai in March 1968. Once more, Vietnam was back on the director's radar, haunting his thoughts, the images and pictures of American action towards combat detainees in Iraq in particular drawing him back to the controversies of another age: his age.

Stone's commitment to the whole project was undeniable, but it collapsed for lack of funding only weeks before principal photography was due to start in late 2007.[59] Drawing on the official army investigation and report by Lt General W. R. Peers published in 1979, *Pinkville* had obvious personal claims to Stone's attention, but the story now had contemporary resonance in the wake of the pictures from Baghdad's Abu Ghraib prison, which accompanied Seymour Hersh's reporting in 2004.[60] As with *War on Terror*, the project spoke to Stone's core interests and was sure to carry political resonance in the wake of the scandal. Several revisions of the script were undertaken in summer and autumn 2007. With funding from United Artists (UA), filming was scheduled to start in December 2007 with Bruce Willis in the lead role. When Willis, unhappy with aspects of the script, pulled out shortly before commencement of shooting, the project was suspended. A replacement in the form of Nicolas Cage was found; however, UA had sustained a poor performance with another war project – *Lions for Lambs* (Robert Redford, 2007) – and pulled the funding for the project, whereupon Weiser pressed his case with Stone to work on

the Bush script.[61] The director consented. He turned his attention to securing finance for the Bush project, which would be titled *W.*, and began in earnest to fine-tune the screenplay.

Stone's involvement in the *W.* script followed a familiar pattern when he was not the original writer. Painstaking reworkings were incorporated to help ensure that the dramatic construction would work. In some situations, this meant small deviations from the historical record. While Ari Fleischer (Rob Corddry) who was President Bush's press secretary was replaced by Scott McClellan in July 2003, Stone opted to retain the Fleischer character in scenes after 2003 for reasons of continuity. The same commitment to dramatic cogency was clearly evident in script review sessions between Stone and Weiser. In one Stone was concerned that a scene involving Laura Bush (Elizabeth Banks) was 'on the edge of exposition'. Weiser countered that 'this really happened', to which Stone replied: 'I'm talking about the dialogue as a movie, about the way they sound as actors. It may be true, but it doesn't fucking matter.'[62] As ever, Stone was searching for tone: he and Weiser did recognise that fear had been a key element in Bush's first term, and advancing that theme was crucial for the screenplay.[63]

Like *Pinkville*, securing finance and agreeing a marketing strategy for *W.* proved difficult. On 1 March 2007 a collaboration agreement was signed between Stone and Moritz Borman with a third signatory – Paul Rassam, a producer who had worked on *Alexander* – added in September. With the help of producer Bill Block, finance for production was confirmed. However, none of the main studios were interested in distributing the film, and the team eventually secured support from Lionsgate. Although known for the horror franchises *Saw* (2003–10) and *Hostel* (2005–11), Lionsgate had found more mainstream recognition with the Oscar-winning *Crash* (Paul Haggis, 2004), and proved to be a supportive partner.

The key marketing objective set for *W.* was to get the film into cinemas before the presidential election in November 2008. In line with this objective, a forty-four-day shoot was scheduled from 12 May to 9 July 2008 in Shreveport, Louisiana, with a total budget of $25 million. Lionsgate's efforts were not helped by an early unauthorised publication of part of the script. The *Hollywood Reporter* carried a story on 7 April 2008, confirming that it had sent script materials to four biographers of George W. Bush for comment.[64]

The unauthorised publication led to legal threats from the production office to several media outlets, including the *Los Angeles Times* blog and *Hollywood Reporter*. Another potential difficulty for Lionsgate was highlighted by *Entertainment Weekly* in its coverage of the making of *W.*[65] Richard Nixon had died almost a year before Stone's biopic of him commenced shooting in May 1995, and more than twenty years had passed since Nixon's resignation from the presidency in August 1974. By comparison, George W. Bush was not only still a serving president, but his legacy and the future of the Republican Party's grip on power was very much in the balance in summer 2008. The possibility that Stone's verdict on Bush might be in cinemas before the November 2008 election ensured close and potentially damaging scrutiny of the proposed film from the media, if not the Republican Party and its supporters.

The *New York Post*'s headline on 13 May 2008, 'Foreign Bucks to Bash Bush', called attention to the overseas funding for the film quoting *Fox News* contributor Monica Crowley as saying: 'Oliver Stone's movies are routinely and predictably packed with lies'.[66] Just like *JFK*, sections of the media were formulating opinions about the film even before it was finished. However, Stone's comments in an *Entertainment Weekly* piece the same month hardly assuaged his critics about the film's ideological stance:

> Bush may turn out to be the worst president in history ... I think history is going to be very tough on him. But that doesn't mean he isn't a great story. It's almost Capraesque, the story of a guy who had very limited talents in life except for the ability to sell himself.[67]

Adding to questions over the politics was the reception of films that had begun to take an increasingly reactionary stance towards the administration after 2005. The Iraq War had been largely box office poison, and by summer 2008 it appeared doubtful as to how a lame-duck president would draw filmgoers to the multiplexes, no matter how intriguing the story might be. When *W.* did arrive in cinemas, this issue was compounded by reviews that suggested there was actually a *lack* of controversy. *Variety*'s Todd McCarthy commented that the film offered 'a relatively even-handed, restrained treatment of recent politics'.[68] Polite – the film and the review – was not exactly what Lionsgate wanted. The company's president, Tom Ortenberg, was quoted in a January 2009 *New Yorker* article

as saying: 'Who wants to see an even-handed editorial think piece from Oliver Stone?'[69]

While Stone had been at pains to emphasise in the media that he really was no fan of the president – he suggested to Rachel Maddow on MSNBC that Bush was not deep and complicated but narrow-minded and provincial, and that part of the Bush legacy would probably be a presidential library with nothing in it – the film seemed strangely restrained to some reviewers.[70] It suited Ortenberg as much as the *New York Post* to play up Stone's image as a controversial filmmaker, yet evidence mounted in review after review that while the film was admired, supporters and critics alike still were not entirely satisfied. Stone was seeking an alternative portrayal here, much as he had done with *Nixon* thirteen years beforehand. While there was no eulogy, Stone was conscious of steering the picture away from the fast-moving and cartoonish polemics of Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*: that caricature, however accurate, had been done. Stone really wanted to know how Bush had ever got to the White House in the first place, and who and what were the controlling forces behind the presidential façade.

The film picks up the administration's story in 2002, after 9/11 but before the invasion of Iraq. Through a series of flashbacks it slowly teases out an understanding of George W. Bush through an examination of his relationships with his father (James Cromwell) and his wife Laura (Elizabeth Banks). Taking us from college days, through dead-end jobs to ownership of the Texas Rangers baseball team and spiritual revival, Stone builds a parallel reading of Bush that criss-crosses his past with the administration's descent into war, and which runs at a tangent to liberal stereotypes of the man – less a condemnation than a plea for empathy.

W. premiered at the Austin Film Festival on 16 October 2008, and went on wider US distribution the following day. Given the press attention during production, the box office response was relatively moderate, with the film taking $25.5 million in the USA. Stone observed that:

> We took the tack of national security. McCain pulled even in the polls in August 2008, and then the economy became the main issue in September. This became the one issue in the election, and at that point our movie became irrelevant to the debate that ensued between Obama and McCain.[71]

While *W.* is most easily categorised as Stone's third presidential biopic, its treatment of subject matter and relative absence of polemic marks a divide between earlier and later projects. Like *JFK* and *Nixon*, *W.* uses the presidential motif to draw us into the hinterland of personal and political intrigue that was part of the history of the period. However, the picture takes a distinctly more personal approach to its subject matter than either of its companion pieces. The film does not ignore the larger historical and political context of Iraq, but that is not its focus, only the *deus ex machina*. In *JFK* and *Nixon*, Stone identified a strong protagonist and allowed each of them to show the audience the context.[72] With *W.* the purpose was less to use the protagonist as guide than fundamentally look at the protagonist themselves. As Stone commented, it was a lighter film made about what he saw as a lighter man: a more compassionate picture than many observers expected, but one bathed in pathos. That was its criticism. You did not have to feel anger at Bush, only pity at seeing a man hopelessly out of his political depth.[73]

W., then, is a film about American politics and the country's participation in the 'War on Terror', but it is also a psychological deconstruction of a man caught in the shadow of his father, just as Richard Nixon was somewhat enveloped by the apparitional presence of his mother in the earlier picture. In seeking to understand the war within Bush, Stone was inviting comprehension rather more than judgement. In that sense, *W.* is curiously sympathetic about the human condition as much as it is about power at the highest level. If Richard Nixon at the very least colluded in the malfeasance of his underlings, Bush is simply sidestepped in as much of a way as Colin Powell (Jeffrey Wright) is in the film. If there was a deeper nuanced message, then a degree of compassion – not necessarily for Bush – was the headline. Stone's choice of ending – Bush's quizzical look skyward for the baseball that will never arrive – was not intended to obscure the difficulties of his time, merely plant Bush in a no-man's land of unfulfilled promises, moral crises and unsustained legacy.

As with the opening scenes of *Nixon*, Stone envisioned Bush as a salesman, a little like Andy Griffith's character Larry 'Lonesome' Rhodes in Elia Kazan's *A Face in the Crowd* (1957). He sold a war, not very well, but he sold himself far better. Iraq may have been about oil for Dick Cheney and about draining the swamp of terrorists for

Donald Rumsfeld, but it was a kind of catharsis for Bush; a final remaking of himself in the material world that built on, and was driven by, his spiritual rebirth as an evangelical Christian. Importantly, Stone's construction of Bush in three acts – the young rebel, the middle-age patrician through marriage and political achievement (as governor of Texas), and finally the president – did not have him changed by these progressions. Emotionally and psychologically scarred by his formative years, Bush in office nevertheless displayed many of the same traits to which his younger self succumbed.

Therefore, Stone's dramatic history in *World Trade Center* and *W.* privileged character above outright polemical commentary. The result was partly to do with circumstance, partly with Hollywood conservatism, and in part to do with Stone's own cinematic evolution. Had Stone's filmography in this period included *War on Terror*, *Jawbreaker* and/or *Pinkville*, then undoubtedly the overall direction and assessment of his work would have looked different. Studio conservatism may have stayed his hand to a degree, but it was not as if, through *Syriana*, *Green Zone* and others, Hollywood was ignoring the question of American political and diplomatic enquiry. In any case, *W.* had different ambitions and focus, and Stone's polemics were being more consciously directed now at documentaries.

Soon after completing *W.*, Stone began to orchestrate a decidedly polemical critique of the entire Luce vision of the 'American Century', both in media appearances and in the construction of his mammoth documentary undertaking, *The Untold History of the United States* (2012). Again, Vietnam was crucial to the discourse of this project – not just for Stone, but for the country as a whole.

Untold History

President Barack Obama made a symbolic appearance at the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial on Memorial Day, 28 May 2012. The date marked the launch of a thirteen-year project approved by Congress to trace and commemorate the war. During his speech, the president commented that:

> One of the most painful chapters in our history was Vietnam – most particularly how we treated our troops who served there. You

> were often blamed for a war you didn't start, when you should have been commended for serving your country with valor. You were sometimes blamed for misdeeds of a few, when the honorable service of the many should have been praised. You came home and sometimes were denigrated, when you should have been celebrated. It was a national shame, a disgrace that should have never happened. And that's why here today we resolve that it will not happen again.[74]

In these comments, as elsewhere in the speech, the intersections with current political and foreign policy preoccupations were not hard to spot. After more than a decade of engagement in the 'War on Terror' started by his processor, President Obama was tacitly acknowledging that American veterans of both Iraq and Afghanistan were returning to a country that was seriously divided on the wisdom of the entire campaign, and the supporting doctrine of a 'War on Terror'. However, his references to Vietnam were also an important acknowledgement of the way in which that war continued to resonate with Americans. Notwithstanding the Reagan era recast as a noble venture, and the Project for the New American Century global mission into the Middle East in particular, Vietnam retains a talismanic power. It continues to embody and disseminate cultural, social and political narratives about the period and the longer ideological and moral superiority prescribed by Henry Luce back in the Second World War.

Leading filmmakers such as Michael Cimino (*The Deer Hunter*, 1978), Norman Jewison (*In Country*, 1989), Francis Ford Coppola (*Apocalypse Now*, 1979), John Irvin (*Hamburger Hill*, 1987), Stanley Kubrick (*Full Metal Jacket*, 1987) and Brian De Palma (*Casualties of War*, 1989) may have had their say on Vietnam, but then they moved on to other topics without a second glance. Stone never left the jungles, hamlets, cities and horrors of the war behind. In the 2000s he had not made a 'Vietnam' movie in fifteen years, but his personal experience, contemporary events, and his continuing media presence propagating ideas, comments and reactions buried him in the conflict almost as much as the 1970s and 1980s had done.

For example, the lessons from Vietnam for the Iraqi and Afghanistan campaigns were drawn out in a long interview with Stone conducted by Bill Moyers, and aired on PBS's *Bill Moyers*

Journal, on 4 December 2009.[75] The interview, intercut with key scenes from *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July*, referenced aspects of the war such as friendly fire and the stress of battle. Moyers began by noting that the president had contended that Afghanistan was *not* like Vietnam. Was that right, and had the director lessons from that war to pass on to the president?[76] Stone reminded the audience of the age-old dictum: invading a country without local knowledge of customs and traditions will not win hearts and minds, and he thought that such a position appeared diametrically opposed to the strategy being enacted by the president. Stone's prediction was that US actions ran the risk of awakening nationalist sentiments within the Pashtun tribes, who would make common cause with the Taliban, resulting in the USA being sucked into a full-scale war – a war that would be likely to go beyond the borders of Afghanistan. Less than five years later, many of Stone's fears became a reality. The emergence of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, their assault on the Kurdish region of that territory, and US dalliances with a military return to lands in which they had spent ten years trying to assert their influence, all reinforced Stone's master narrative of ignorance and complicity in the rise of local, ethnic and ideological insurgency.

The Moyers interview provided an important insight into Stone's thinking around where broader, post-war American history was now heading. The *Untold History* series already was starting to take some shape on paper. This interview and other media appearances not only showcased the emerging argument, but acted as a spur to further thinking and debate with co-writer and historian Peter Kuznick about the scope and direction of the documentary series. Stone's conception of the USA was of a nation driven by New Century thinking that could not entirely escape the old Cold War and bipolar diplomacy. As the 2010s loomed, America's president could not extricate his nation's foreign policy from some of the fundamentals of the Luce-centred 'American Century' tropes that had fashioned the country's reactions for so long. Stone's desire to get to the bottom of why this version of history had taken such a hold on American policy was evidenced in the enormous effort that went into the work with Kuznick.

Explored in ten hours of footage and approximately 750 pages of accompanying text, the *Untold History* project had a long gestation

period. In 1996 Stone and Kuznick had discussed a film treatment about US vice-president Henry Wallace and his ouster from the Democratic ticket at the 1944 Democratic Party conference. Although that film never made it off the page, Stone found himself drawn back to the story a decade later, while discussing with Kuznick the idea of a short documentary about Truman and the H-bomb; the larger project emerging from that discussion. Beginning with the US entry into the Second World War and then following US foreign policy through the Cold War, Vietnam, Nixon and *détente* to Reagan, the series culminates with an episode looking at the US administration's first war of the twenty-first century: the 'War on Terror'.

The series drew together much of Stone's preoccupation with American history. Originally titled *An Inconvenient History: A Counter History of the United States*, the budget of $5.2 million was to cover all ten chapters. The original structure for the series started with a chapter on Hiroshima, followed by one on Luce and Wallace, after which the story of the Cold War and its aftermath would be traced.[77] A later revision began with the Second World War, followed by a chapter specifically on the atom bomb, whereupon the narrative would step back in the following two chapters to consider events at the turn of the century through to the Great Depression and the New Deal, before picking up the post-war story from Korea to Afghanistan, with the final chapter titled 'War on Terror'.

The shooting of *W.* delayed plans to air the series in October 2010, and these were further disrupted by Stone's belated acceptance of the offer to direct a follow-up to *Wall Street*. All this took place while he prepared and shot his *South of the Border* documentary. *South of the Border* premiered at the Venice Film Festival in September 2009, just two days before the commencement of principal photography on *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*, by which point the shooting of *Castro in Winter* had also been completed. Stone's high-pressure production schedule at this time confirmed his energy for the projects, and reminds one of the intensity of his late-1980s heyday.

By December 2009, Kuznick and Stone had drafts for the first six chapters of *Untold History*, although there were already concerns about some of the content and the direction that the work was taking. Stone felt that the chapters were becoming bloated

and overly complex, a criticism that Kuznick accepted.[78] What was becoming apparent was a developing professional tension in terms of approach and objectives. Ultimately, Stone was looking for something that would work as a television programme, whereas Kuznick was seeking a much more detailed account of the events. It was a classic juxtaposition of a historian's eye for detail, and a filmmaker's unbending desire to get to the story. A resolution was found in the decision to publish a companion book with the series.

Through 2010, Stone juggled *Untold History* between other projects. Showtime agreed to postpone the planned October 2010 airing, giving Stone and Kuznick more time as the chapters expanded to twelve, and progress on the companion book continued apace. Beyond the concerns about detail, Stone was very alert to how the series might be presented and received by audiences.

Indicative of this depth of concern were protracted discussions over the title of the series. In August 2010, Stone wrote to Kuznick saying he wanted to change the title from *Secret History of the United States* – the working title at that point – to *The Untold History of the United States*. He was concerned about the connotations of 'secret' in so far as it invited potential criticisms from the more literally minded about where the secrets were, when in fact what the series was doing was presenting a different point of view with established facts. In spring 2011, there was further discussion about the title, and several alternatives were considered and rejected. A proposal from Stone in January 2011 to call the series *Empire: The Forgotten History of the United States* was questioned by producer Fernando Sulichin, because of the polarising nature of the word 'empire'. In March 2011, Stone discussed possible titles with David Nevins, the president of Showtime. Stone was concerned that calling the series *Oliver Stone's Forgotten History of the United States* would foreground his name in a way that might be unhelpful, while Nevins in turn was worried about what 'forgotten' might suggest to audiences. Nevins had been a supporter of the *Untold History* option for some months previous to this and, as it turned out, this title prevailed.

In parallel with these discussions about the title, steps were taken to test the materials at private screenings with invited historians and other professionals. On 18 March 2011, a screening was organised at the Tribeca Film Center for several historians, including Sean Wilentz, Professor of History at Princeton University.

Wilentz would later emerge as one of the leading critics of the book and the series. Other private screenings for academics and media people followed. The need to secure a degree of professional endorsement for the line of argument pursued in the book and series was something exercising Stone and Kuznick from an early phase of the work. However, this task was complicated, not least by a particular media storm over comments that Stone made in an interview published in the *Sunday Times* in July 2010,[79] in which he described Hitler as a 'Frankenstein' but that the monster also needed a Dr Frankenstein: the implication being that others both inside and outside Germany, including American industrialists, assisted with Hitler's rise to power.

Stone also bluntly suggested that Hitler may have done more damage to the Russian people than he did to the Jews. The American Jewish Committee was quick to claim that Stone had effectively 'outed' himself as an anti-Semite.[80] A swift apology on the same day was an effort to quell the online storm that had quickly gathered, but Stone's penchant for never working from scripts – he seldom has any paperwork with him at all –has left him exposed sometimes, as here, to unsolicited comments. Quickly retreating from them has not always done the trick.

Despite Stone's apology, the story inevitably resurfaced. In a *New York Post* article in March 2011, Alan Dershowitz made reference to the remarks in the context of a story on anti-Semitism that, in reality, was recycling several earlier celebrity stories on the subject.[81] Stone responded via his producer Edward Pressman, but the incident illustrated the challenges of media management generated by the director's sometimes combative, off-the-cuff remarks. A more unusual and final pre-launch effort to support the reception of the series took place at the private Wellfleet Harbor conference in September 2012, at which one of the episodes was shown.[82] This was the first film presented in the forty-seven-year history of the group, and seen as an opportunity to create a positive buzz with key thinkers.

Following a successful showing of the first three chapters at the New York Film Festival in October 2012, the series finally aired on Showtime commencing on 12 November 2012, just two weeks after publication of the accompanying book. The plan to complete twelve episodes had been revised in spring 2011, bringing the final series in at ten episodes, with the two pre-Second World War episodes

removed from the broadcast schedule but retained for the DVD box set.

Stone gave several interviews to online news shows, including *The Young Turks* and MOXnews.com, and made appearances at public meetings, including the Penny Stamps School of Art and Design at the University of Michigan, as part of the 'Distinguished Speakers' series with journalist Bob Woodruff, where he stated his motivations for the programmes.[83] In these appearances, Stone talked about the atomic bomb, the shadow that it cast on post-war life in the USA, and the way in which he believed that had Truman not ascended to the presidency, American history might have been very different. This line of thinking, in turn, had led to a re-evaluation of what Stone described as a series of American-concentric myths about the winning of the Second World War, the bomb and the Cold War. He reasserted his contention that there are a series of arguments about US foreign policy that are not being heard, and he was looking to position the book and the series as a contribution to the wider debate about twentieth (and now twenty-first-)century US history. Pedagogically, Stone also tied his thoughts to a concern about what high-school children – including his daughter – were being taught of this history, and why.

Figure 4 Oliver Stone and Peter Kuznick, Hiroshima, 2013

The introduction to the first chapter of the book goes to the heart of this point. Stone and Kuznick refer to the 'tyranny of now': the tendency of news to offer no historical context to current events (Figure 4). As part of the narrative, Stone proposed to foreground a forgotten set of heroes: people who had been lost to history because they did not conform; arguing that despite profound mistakes, the country still had an opportunity to rehabilitate such people. One of Stone and Kuznick's central claims in the series was that Roosevelt's death on 12 April 1945 allowed the manoeuvrings at the 1944 Democratic Convention in Chicago, where Henry Wallace was defeated by Truman for the vice-presidential nomination, to exert a decisive and terrible effect on the course of the war and the peace to follow. Truman served only eighty-two days as vice-president before his ascendancy to the Oval Office. Stone and Kuznick's portrayal of Wallace's defeat is decidedly Capraesque. Having distinguished himself as Secretary of Agriculture and credited with a revival of the American farming industry in the wake of the Great Depression, Wallace nevertheless represented the radical wing of the Democrat Party that some activists feared. Therefore, the convention outcome derailed any possibility that his 1943 riposte to Luce, *The Century of the Common Man*, would ever become post-war policy.[84]

Beyond the lionisation of Wallace, Stone and Kuznick took a highly critical perspective on Truman: that despite being diligent in his efforts to succeed in both business and politics, and gifted to a degree, crucial personal limitations left him particularly ill-suited to the complex task of dealing with the Soviets in the implementation of the Yalta Agreement, and the conclusion of the war in the Pacific. After the war, this emerging interventionist and anti-Soviet stance was given a policy mooring in President Truman's 12 March 1947 speech to Congress: the Truman Doctrine. The argument runs that the subsequent division and remilitarisation of Germany, the expansion of overseas military bases and establishment of NATO, the testing of larger atomic weapons and, subsequently, a series of foreign covert interventions led by the CIA, were not just immediate manifestations of the Doctrine in the Cold War era, but the harbinger of a mindset of empire that propelled the administration and military not just into Vietnam, but inexorably on into Iraq and Afghanistan.

The on-screen polemics were articulated in a decidedly low-key manner. Stone delivered the narrative at a relatively slow pace, as a more or less continuous voiceover, broken only by the occasional segment of archive speech or actor-read voiceover. There are no talking-head inputs other than Stone's initial introduction to the series at the beginning of Chapter 1, and a few words at the end of Chapter 10. The voiceover and extensive use of archive film footage certainly carry overtones of a classic of the genre, *The World at War* (1973–74). Moreover, even with the addition of film clips, the overall effect is a distinct disavowal of the kind of entertainment values deployed by, for example Michael Moore and Alex Gibney, in favour of a presentation that is self-consciously didactic in construction and tone. Whether the style suited modern high-school audiences or even general viewers – all of which Stone aimed to pull in – is open to speculation, and certainly worthy of further examination. Showtime's own audience analysis indicated that the series maintained its first night audience levels throughout the series, and Stone and Kuznick, with the help of Eric Singer, a colleague of Kuznick's at American University, augmented the appeal to high-school audiences by later providing detailed lesson plans supporting each episode.[85]

The final chapter of *Untold History* concluded on a note of hope, but one tinged with disappointment. The moments when history might have taken the USA towards a more humane and humble outlook on the world but did not, might prepare people for a better understanding of the past, thought Stone, and a better response when another opportunity arrives in the future. Stone gave the final word to President Kennedy and his commencement address at American University in 1963.[86] It was the rhetoric of hope in what was otherwise a relentless indictment of US foreign policy.

Stone's media profile ensured reaction both from journalists and academics. A *New York Times Magazine* article about the series published in November 2012 was headlined 'Oliver Stone Rewrites History – Again'[87] Aside from the commentary on the *Untold History* series, Andrew Goldman's article revisited the *JFK* saga in a way that suggested Stone's film continued to grate. In February 2013, after the series had aired in America, Sean Wilentz wrote in the *New York Review of Books* that Stone and Kuznick

effectively cherry-picked their facts throughout the programmes to support their interpretations.[88] Wilentz was challenging a broader development in historical analysis that historians such as Robert Rosenstone had raised years before, not least in a debate with Stone at the 1997 American Historical Association meeting. On the changes in historical analysis in the previous fifty years, Rosenstone described an emerging view of history as a moral story about the past in which the truth resided 'not in the verifiability of individual pieces of data but in the overall narrative'.[89] Rosenstone's point was that history is a contentious business which does not simply possess an accumulation of settled facts. The implication was that some of the criticism of Stone had been academically proprietorial. He was accused of presenting himself as a historian, and Wilentz's criticisms drew on that unease. Yet Stone had moved ever closer to documentary traditions and with it historical accountability, but here he was, still being held up to feature film criticisms and contentions.

Following the series, Stone continued expounding the programme's views in a series of engagements. In August 2013, before taking part in a speaking tour of Japan, he joined in with protesters on Jeju island in South Korea who were opposing the construction of a naval base. After the Edward Snowden disclosures about mass surveillance by the NSA and its British counterpart GCHQ (Government Communications Headquarters) broke, Stone drew on these revelations to push further his argument about the overreach of the American empire.[90] Stone and Kuznick wrote a joint piece for the *Huffington Post* in which they quoted Samuel P. Huntington and captured all that Stone's assessment of war and the American empire had come to mean for him: 'The West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas, values or religion ... but rather by its superiority in applying organised violence. Westerners often forget this fact; non-Westerners never do.'[91]

Conclusion

In *World Trade Center* and *W.* as well as the *Untold History* series and other documentaries during this period, notably *South of the Border*, Stone provided a mix of melodramatic and polemic

assessment of America as it wrestled with the 'War on Terror' and its place in the world after 9/11. Stone's own production files show that some explicitly political materials were considered for production, but could not be executed for a number of reasons. Against that backdrop, *World Trade Center* and *W.* stand as testaments to the changed environment in Hollywood and in the country post-9/11 to what was possible in those circumstances, as well as being confirming statements of Stone's own realignment. *World Trade Center* has several parallels with *Platoon*, both in its narrative subtext about individual courage and in its concluding message about goodness. Both films had mixed receptions from critics, and both captured something of the zeitgeist of the era. Of course, two things had changed in the interim. The zeitgeist had slipped its liberal moorings in favour of a neo-conservative berth, and Stone's chosen tool to upbraid the establishment had changed from drama to documentary. It was a conscious choice intended to maintain the momentum of political critique, yet critics either stuck with their reticence towards the feature films, and/or failed to spot the more approachable criticism directed out of the documentaries.

Most of all, critics did not appreciate how much Stone's work had been embedded by thoughts of 'war'; literal, metaphoric and symbolic. The message of war in *Platoon* was a cry to learn from the past, and *Untold History* paraded the same signs about the possibilities for a better world. However, what *Platoon*, *World Trade Center* and *W.* all truly emphasise is the understanding that ultimately, war is rooted in the battle within ourselves, within individual conscience and within our soul. Henry Luce's 'American Century' required that self-interest and power trumped all other concerns, and war was the necessary consequence of such ideals. Stone's filmmaking career, rightly or wrongly, consistently and antithetically battled those feelings about war in favour of understanding, compassion and humility.

Notes

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