

## Coming to Terms with the Vietnam War

### *A Sacred Mission: Oliver Stone and Vietnam*

Randy Roberts and David Welky

*From John Wayne's The Green Berets (1968) to today, more than a hundred film-makers have addressed the war in Vietnam. From Michael Cimino and Francis Ford Coppola to Sylvester Stallone and Chuck Norris, from box-office hits to art-house flops, the war has provided a way to address a history of social and political issues. No film-maker has been more absorbed in the war and its meaning than Oliver Stone. In such films as Platoon (1986), Born on the Fourth of July (1989), JFK (1991), Heaven and Earth (1993), and Nixon (1995), he has addressed the elements of American culture and politics that led to the war, the nature of the conflict, and the human price of the engagement. For Stone, a Vietnam veteran, the war was the central American experience in the second half of the twentieth century. Understanding the war, then, became essential to understanding modern American history. In the following essay Randy Roberts and David Welky explore Stone's efforts to get to the heart of the Vietnam experience.*

*"To me the '60s were very hard – my parents got divorced, I went to Vietnam."*

*"If it's a movie worth making, you should make it. If you can convey that passion, it should all be open. Anything is permitted."*

*"Vietnam is not over, although some people say it is. Vietnam is a state of mind that continues all over the world – as long as m[a]n in his quest for power interferes in the affairs of other men"*

*"Part of me is scared, and wants to say, let's pull back, let's make a film that is understandable to everyone, that's sweeter, that the whole country can believe in, like Forrest Gump." (Oliver Stone)*

In September 1967, Oliver Stone departed the United States on a transport bound for Vietnam. Behind him he left his life – an unhappy childhood; frustrating, lonely years at Hill School and Yale; a long, rejected novel manuscript. He might have been

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Ernest Hemingway heading for Italy, or Joseph Conrad bound for the sea. Perhaps his mind was already tracking film images, imagining what might have been and what would be. Perhaps Vietnam was more of an escape than a mission. Whatever the case, the country would soon take hold of him, and it would occupy his thoughts and his creativity for much of the next thirty years. Few artists would delve so completely into the nature, texture, and causes of the Vietnam War. Fewer still would produce such a dazzling body of work. And at the heart of it all would be biography – Stone's and America's.

For Oliver Stone, exploring Vietnam would become a sacred mission. As a young man, he served two tours in the country – one as a civilian, the other as a soldier. These experiences changed him and set his artistic agenda. For the next twenty-five years he would return repeatedly to Vietnam for inspiration. The conflict became his touchstone; it provided him with both an avenue for personal exploration and a tool for understanding larger historical questions.

In a series of brilliant films about America and Vietnam, Stone moved from autobiographical observations about the nature of war, to a sociological analysis of the American culture that led to the war, to historical investigation of the political causes and course of the war. In the process, Stone became the most influential historian of America's role in Vietnam. But to understand Stone's position, one has to come to terms with Stone himself.

Considering his career as a writer and director of powerful films that deal with war, it is perhaps not surprising that, had it not been for World War II, Oliver Stone's parents would never have met. Louis Stone, Oliver's father, was a Wall Street stockbroker and the scion of a wealthy family. He met Jacqueline Goddet, a poor nineteen-year-old beauty, shortly after V-E Day, while he was serving as a financial officer for General Eisenhower in Paris. After some initial hesitation, Jacqueline wed Louis in November 1945. By the time the couple returned to New York City, Jacqueline was pregnant with what would be their only child. William Oliver Stone was born on September 15, 1946.

The future critic of the establishment grew up within its comfortable embrace. Despite being prone to making poor financial decisions, his father generally proved to be a good provider, enabling Oliver to lead, by his own admission, "a sheltered existence." Oliver lived in a large townhouse complete with a nanny and a butler, dressed stylishly, studied piano, and listened to classical music and Broadway show tunes. After finishing eighth grade at Manhattan's Trinity School, his parents shipped him to the exclusive Hill School, an all-boys academy in Pottstown, Pennsylvania. Oliver knew that Hill was the first step that would probably lead to Yale and Wall Street, the path his father had taken.

Oliver's childhood was pampered, but hardly happy. Both his parents were distant. His mother seemed more interested in New York's party scene than in him, and his father was a "dark and pessimistic" man who had a hard time expressing his emotions. Oliver's closest family may have been his grandparents in France. As a youth, he spent his summers in Europe, raptly listening to his grandfather tell stories about the Great War and happily playing army with his cousins on the battlefields where millions of men had lost their lives. He passed summer days writing plays, many about war, that willing locals performed.

But the carefree summers ended, and he faced the unappealing prospect of returning to the States and school. Although he was intellectually curious and fascinated

with American and European history, he was uncomfortable at Hill. A self-proclaimed “outsider,” he made few friends, chafed under the strict discipline of the boarding school, and resented its efforts to impose a rigid “orthodoxy” upon him. Like many adolescents, Oliver was extremely “self-conscious,” living in constant fear of being ridiculed by fellow students. Burdened with feelings of isolation, he pursued his interest in writing, primarily as a means of “retreat[ing] from reality.”

His family life got even lonelier. In 1962, when he was fifteen, the headmaster of Hill called him to his office to inform him that his parents were separating. The news shocked him; he had failed or refused to see any signs of discord in his parents’ relationship. In fact, the split surprised few others. Louis had had a string of affairs, and Jacqueline, fully aware of her husband’s philandering, coped by partying, popping uppers, and, finally, taking lovers of her own. By the early 1960s, the Stones’ marriage existed solely on paper. Now, when Oliver most needed attention, his parents reinforced his sense of isolation by refusing to visit him. Oliver wanted to take a leave from school, but his father would not hear of it, claiming that he was too busy at work to attend to anyone else. Jacqueline was even more remote – she left for Europe, expressing no interest in seeing her son. Oliver received another shock when he learned that Jacqueline’s free-spending habits had driven the family into debt. Louis moved, with Oliver’s possessions, from their spacious town house to a cramped hotel room. Oliver was devastated. His parents’ actions taught him that “adults were dangerous” and “not to be trusted.”

Abandoned by his parents, he accepted the grind at Hill. Unsure of his future, he struggled through his last tedious years of high school. World events seemed remote. Certainly, he did not see his destiny in the assassination of President Kennedy. Raised a staunch Republican by his conservative father (Oliver voted for Barry Goldwater in 1964), he has only vague memories of being “on a lunch break or something” when he heard of the president’s death. Although he was never a “Kennedy lover when he was alive,” Stone was shocked by the crime, but no more than others. He was not burdened with concerns for America’s future, only “stunned” that “a young, handsome president could be killed like that.” He fully accepted the Warren Commission’s finding that Kennedy had been killed by Lee Harvey Oswald alone.

Personal concerns were more pressing. In accordance with his father’s wishes, in 1964 he enrolled at Yale. He quickly realized that college would be more of “the same crap” that Hill had been. Even more than before, he desperately searched for meaning in his life, longing to break out of the constricting East Coast conservative mold that his father had crammed him into. Books provided a means of escape. He devoured Joseph Conrad’s writings and was especially drawn to *Lord Jim*, with Conrad’s dark view of human nature and his lush depictions of the exotic Orient. The idea of living in a primitive land, unsullied by civilization, consumed him, and he began inquiring about possibilities for overseas employment. After several rejections, he was finally accepted by the Free Pacific Institute in Taiwan, a church-based organization that operated a number of schools. The Institute offered him a position as an English teacher at a school in Cholon, the Chinese suburb of Saigon. In 1965, he dropped out of Yale and headed for Vietnam.

Saigon, with its gambling, drugs, and prostitution, was no Yale. It “was like Dodge City.” Hookers stalked busy street corners, drunks spilled out from numerous bars, and guns and violence were common. The hot sun and the nearby ocean lent a sense of romance to the chaotic scene. Stone felt alive. After the suffocating depths of Hill

School and Yale, Saigon was like coming up for air. He plunged into his new job, working hard and living a spartan life, but loving it all.

But an immediate, itchy restlessness persisted. Travel had gotten into his blood, and he wanted to see more of the world. He quit his teaching position after two semesters and joined the merchant marine, where he passed his days cleaning toilets and engine rooms. After a long voyage from Vietnam to Oregon, the nineteen-year-old Stone drifted south to Mexico to write a novel. The manuscript, which he called "A Child's Night Dream," grew into a 1,400-page stream-of-consciousness look at the psyche of a bright, troubled youth. The largely autobiographical story followed the protagonist through his experiences in Asia and the merchant marine. Stone worked furiously through much of 1966 at what he thought was a literary masterpiece, eventually feeling confident enough to return to New York City and the harsh judgment of his father, who desperately wanted his son to return to Yale and a buttoned-down life. Stone finally gave in and reenrolled, but unenthusiastically. "Night Dream" continued to occupy his thoughts and his energy. He worked on his novel at a punishing pace, skipping classes and writing about ten hours every day. Not surprisingly, his return to Yale was brief and inglorious. He was expelled but, undaunted, returned to New York to finish his book. The incredible effort he poured into the novel only made it more painful when publishers panned the manuscript. Frustrated, he threw hundreds of pages into the East River and decided to take a drastic step. He would visit Vietnam again, this time as a soldier.

Because he was a well-educated white male, the army offered Stone a position at Officer Candidate School. He refused and requested infantry duty. His decision to go to war appears rash but actually stemmed from a number of factors. To be sure, he had been hurt by the series of personal and literary rejections. But he was equally upset by the grand literary pretensions he had harbored. In a sense, his decision to enlist was an act of atonement for his perceived character flaws; he yearned to "obliterate" the ego he had created and, after a long bout with individualism, become an "anonymous" grunt. Though he often considered suicide, he could not bring himself to "pull the trigger." Instead, he resolved to let someone else pull it for him on a battlefield.

But perhaps more than anything else, Stone went to Vietnam simply because he believed in the war. Like many other Americans who grew up during the 1950s, he had learned to "fear Russians and hate Communism." He fully believed that communism needed to be stopped in order to preserve American democracy, and he felt it was his duty to fight. His father had served during World War II, his grandfather during World War I. Now it was his turn to serve his country and, by doing so, to announce that he was "a man." Imbued with both pathos and patriotism, Private Bill Stone (he opted to enlist using his first name, fearing that "Oliver" was too effeminate) left for Vietnam on September 14, 1967, and was assigned to the second platoon of Bravo Company, Third Battalion, 25th Infantry, stationed near the Cambodian border.

Naive optimism and idealism soon crumbled under the weight of reality. Vietnam was not the same place it had been in 1965. By 1967, many Vietnamese had gone from loving to loathing the occupying Americans. Corruption ran rampant as noncombatants lived high, far behind the lines, and unscrupulous sergeants stole supplies to sell on the black market. Stone quickly discovered that Vietnam was not a people's conflict but a politicians' war fought by the poorest Vietnamese and Americans. Just as disconcerting for him were the unexpected attitudes of his new comrades in arms, who made

it clear to him that he was as "expendable" as a piece of "raw meat." Very quickly he realized that enlisting had been "a terrible mistake" and that he was "in deep." One of his only pleasures was writing long, introspective letters to his grandmother, Adele Goddet, in France.

Stone was given little time to adjust to his new surroundings. After only a week, he found himself on point in a night ambush. He struggled through nearly a week of field duty without confronting the enemy. His greatest adversaries were the incessant swarms of mosquitoes that kept him awake at night, the spiders that crawled in his shirt, and the fifty pounds of equipment on his back that nearly overwhelmed him as he humped through the jungle. One night he fell asleep during his watch, waking to discover that the Vietcong (VC) were practically on top of the platoon. "Scared shitless" and numbed with fear, he forgot his training and silently stared. A comrade opened fire on the oncoming troops, jolting Stone out of his stupor. He pulled the trigger, but had forgotten to take the safety off his M-16. Eventually, he regained his bearings and the platoon beat back the VC approach, but not before at least one American was severely wounded. Stone received a flesh wound in the neck during the melee and was briefly out of action.

His first taste of battle improved his combat sense. It also, despite his mistake during the ambush, put him more at ease with the other members of the platoon. He could not, however, completely fit in. The differences in background between him and the other grunts were obvious. He enjoyed classical music and serious literature, while they favored Hank Williams and Motown, hard liquor and serious drugs. One of Stone's comrades later recalled that he was "a quiet person who kept to himself." At first, he did not drink, spending his leisure hours writing stories of his experiences. Slowly, however, the war changed him. As his tour dragged on, he felt himself becoming disconnected from his civilized roots and becoming a "jungle animal," operating less on reason than "instinct." Increasingly, he sided with the progressive element of the platoon, who preferred Motown and drugs to the country music and alcohol that fueled the platoon's other faction. Stone's association with this group, composed mostly of lower-class blacks and whites from small towns, expanded his horizons and exposed him to the social injustice and prejudice of American life.

Then came 1968. There was nothing happy about Stone's new year. On January 1, he and 700 other U.S. soldiers were attacked by some 2,000 VC troops at Firebase Burt. The enemy lobbed mortars into the American entrenchment before beginning a ground assault at one in the morning. The American perimeter collapsed, and Stone's platoon was thrown into the counterattack. The VC inched forward, taking bunker after bunker, and the battle quickly devolved into brutal hand-to-hand combat. But the fighting came to an abrupt close when American planes dropped bombs directly on the American position, killing friend and foe without discrimination. The incident embittered Stone. As he watched bulldozers push lifeless Vietnamese bodies into a mass grave, he wondered if the American force had been no more than bait, a dab of honey designed to lure the antlike VC army into the open.

But Stone had little time to ponder. Just two weeks later, Bravo Company was hit again, this time while on patrol a few miles from Firebase Burt. Bravo's third platoon stumbled into a VC bunker complex and got pinned down. The first platoon faced a similar predicament. It was up to Stone and the second platoon to extricate the men from the morass. But Stone's jungle instincts let him down; he got caught in a trip-wire

explosion and received shrapnel in his leg and his rear. Medics shot him full of morphine, packed him on a stretcher, and loaded him on a helicopter. Bravo Company took about thirty casualties without inflicting any. Stone's rehabilitation kept him off the field during the Tet Offensive, which further devastated Bravo. By the time he returned to duty, he barely recognized anyone in his largely reconstructed platoon.

After another brief stint on combat duty, he was transferred to a military police auxiliary battalion in Saigon, where he guarded barracks and trolled for miscreants. The new duty bored Stone, and he numbed the tedium with drugs. The jungle beckoned. He wanted to get back into the heat of battle and got his wish after brawling with a rear-duty sergeant. In order to avoid having his tour extended as punishment, Stone opted in April 1968 to volunteer for the First Cavalry Division's reconnaissance and minesweeping detail.

The transfer proved portentous for his later career. While in the First Cavalry, Stone met a large black man from a small town in Tennessee who would later become the basis for "King" in *Platoon*. He also met a half-Spanish, half-Apache sergeant named Juan Angel Elias, who fascinated him. Elias, recalls Stone, "was like a rock star in the body of a soldier." Rather than terrify, the compassionate Elias inspired his men. He was a heavy drug user who was loathed by the lifers and juicers. Stone stayed close to Elias, learning how to rely on his senses, not his intellect, during combat. For the first time, Stone believed that it was possible to be both a good soldier and a good person.

By now, Stone had become a veteran, a fact he demonstrated in August 1968 when the platoon got pinned down by a North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldier with a machine gun in a foxhole. With his fellow soldiers trapped under a hail of bullets, Stone lost contact with reality and functioned on pure instinct. With reckless abandon, he charged the bunker and, while on the run, lobbed a grenade directly into the hole, thus buying time for the platoon to be rescued. He is still at a loss to explain what happened to him. "Something went crazy in my head," he explains. "I flipped out." He received the Bronze Star for his heroism/confusion.

As the war dragged on, Stone sensed a loss of basic humanity. Yet another transfer brought him under the influence of Platoon Sergeant Barnes. Barnes had become something of an army legend. He had been wounded six or seven times, and one shot over the eye had left a large, sickle-shaped scar down the left side of his face. A passionate soldier, he volunteered to return to combat after every wound. In contrast to Elias, Barnes was "a very frightening man" with a "cold stare" that grunts felt "all the way down to [their] balls." Stone and the other awestruck soldiers were terrified yet intrigued by the grizzled warrior. From Barnes, Stone learned how to suppress his emotions, kill, and become a disciplined, mechanized soldier. Death came to concern him no more than life, and his sense of right and wrong eroded. He burned villages on "a steady basis." He watched uncaringly as frustrated U.S. troops sprayed mosquito repellent on their feet to make them sore so they could avoid marching and as they committed random acts of violence against Vietnamese civilians. He coolly stood by as one soldier, who would become "Bunny" in *Platoon*, bashed an old woman's head in with his rifle butt. In one village, Stone lost control and began shooting at an old man's feet because "he wouldn't stop smiling" at him. He could not, however, bring himself to kill the old man. Finally, he was shaken out of his complacency when he witnessed two U.S. soldiers raping a young village girl. He broke up the incident and decided that it was time to reassert his humanity. Looking at the world around him, he noticed the natural beauty

of Vietnam. He purchased a 35mm Pentax and took the first of hundreds of snapshots of the country. For the first time, he thought of the war in visual terms.

Stone received his discharge orders in late November 1968. In fifteen months, he had earned a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart with an Oak Leaf Cluster for his multiple wounds. Yet even now there was sadness. Just before he was shipped home, he learned that Sergeant Elias had been killed, possibly by an errant American grenade. Stone was eager to leave the heat, insects, fatigue, jungle rot, and frustration behind, but he was still uncertain about his future. He thought that the war was "rotten and corrupt" and lacked "moral purpose" and integrity, but he did not feel that he could challenge the system. Burned out and drugged up, the twenty-two-year-old private returned to the United States with no immediate plans.

He was not prepared to return to New York – his father's New York, a city of commerce, commitment, and respectability. So, without even letting his parents know that he had come back from the war, he fled to Mexico. He found the experience unsatisfying and headed north after only a few days. But his homecoming would not be a happy one. American authorities busted Stone at the border for carrying two ounces of Vietnamese marijuana and threw him into a federal jail in San Diego. He faced the unpleasant prospect of five to twenty years behind bars. It was two weeks before prison officials allowed him to call his dad, but once Louis put up \$2,500 for his son's defense, the public attorney suddenly took an interest in Stone's case, and he was soon released. The experience convinced him that nobody in America cared about Vietnam veterans and served to further radicalize him. Having seen injustice abroad, conditions in the prison alerted him to injustice at home. The jail was as horrible as those in Saigon. Inmates were stuffed "in every fucking nook and cranny"; and 5,000 prisoners, mostly young blacks and Hispanics, had to sleep on the floor.

Life outside of prison was not much better. Stone returned to New York and life with his father. Louis, however, complained about Oliver's drug use and ghetto speech. Further, Oliver felt estranged from his old acquaintances. His friends had avoided the war, and most of his Vietnam buddies went back to the small, southern towns they came from. Americans' lack of interest in the war, their "mass indifference," stung him. Nobody wanted to hear his stories of Vietnam's horrors; they were much more interested in "the business of making money." Even the antiwar movement troubled and disgusted him. He felt that it was not really serious about becoming "militarized and politicized" in order to force a peace and served only as a means for pampered college students to blow off steam.

Deciding that he would never be at peace with himself until he had written about Vietnam, Stone began writing a screenplay called *Break*, a story that moved on a symbolic level but contained characters that would later become Rhah, King, Bunny, Lehner, Barnes, and Elias in *Platoon*. After working slavishly on the script, he sent it to Jim Morrison of the Doors, whom he envisioned as the star. Though he never heard back from the singer, the experience convinced him that he could be a filmmaker. He was accepted at New York University's film school and studied under Martin Scorsese, who believed that, despite his penchant for cinematic excess, Stone showed potential as a filmmaker. He was particularly impressed with his student's first film, *Last Year in Vietnam*, a touching appraisal of the trials and tribulations of a Vietnam vet coming home. But Stone did not blend well with the other students. He was older than most and a loner by nature, leading many to believe that he was arrogant. Similarly, he found

himself unable to participate in NYU's political scene. While other students marched, Stone advocated "a fucking revolution." He wanted to push beyond "bullshit meetings and conferences" and called for an armed march on Washington.

Stone's marriage in 1971 to Najwa Sarkis, a Lebanese woman who worked for the Moroccan Mission to the United Nations, seemed to calm him a bit. She made enough to support them both and encouraged him to work on writing screenplays. He completed his degree in September 1971 and began to bounce from job to job. While he wrote screenplays, he earned money as a Xerox boy for a copy pool, a messenger, and a cabdriver. By mid-1976, he had written eleven scripts and even directed one, *Seizure*, on a shoestring budget in Canada but failed to attract much critical or popular attention. It seemed he was going nowhere at a frantic pace. His marriage fell apart, he quit one job after another, and success continued to elude him. As America celebrated its bicentennial, Oliver Stone was a marginally employed twenty-five-year-old living in a cheap apartment in New York City.

Had Stone been a movie character, he would have been *Taxi Driver's* Travis Bickle. He had lost all faith in the government, largely due to the trauma of Watergate. Oddly, he admired Nixon, whose toughness, conservatism, and emotionlessness reminded him of his father, but the scandal destroyed any respect he may have had for the president. Watergate also convinced him that the government was "a lie" and "hammered home the point" that it had "lied to us about Ho Chi Minh and it lied to us about the Vietnam War." His depression was magnified when his grandmother died in 1976. Instead of adding to his rootlessness, however, her death inspired Stone to rededicate himself to making something of his life. Armed with this newfound conviction, he turned once again to Vietnam – the real Vietnam this time, not a symbolic one. In a few weeks of furious typing he produced the screenplay for *Platoon*.

Stone started shopping *Platoon* around Hollywood and attracted the attention of Stan Kamen of the William Morris Agency. Encouraged, he moved to Los Angeles, but no studio expressed interest in the film. The writing, however, was powerful enough that Columbia Pictures hired him to write a treatment of Billy Hayes's autobiography, *Midnight Express*. His screenplay won an Academy Award for best adapted screenplay of 1978 and brought more opportunities his way, including an offer from producer Marty Bergman (*Serpico*, *Dog Day Afternoon*) to write a screenplay for Ron Kovic's book, *Born on the Fourth of July*. Al Pacino was set to star, and William Friedkin was to direct. The releases of *The Deer Hunter* and *Coming Home*, however, threatened to overload the market for Vietnam films, and *Born's* funding fell through three days before shooting was to begin.

But work was now easier to find. Stone wrote and directed *The Hand* (1981), a low-budget thriller starring Michael Caine, and produced an early version of the script for *Conan the Barbarian* (1982). In Hollywood, he was earning a reputation for writing violent, right-wing screenplays, a charge that gained strength from his scripts for *Scarface* (1983), *Year of the Dragon* (1985), and *8 Million Ways to Die* (1986). He resented the stereotype and found inspiration in Warren Beatty's *Reds*, a film that proved to him that a Hollywood movie could be both big-budget and leftist. Then, in 1984, Dino DeLaurentis agreed to finance *Platoon*. Once again, however, funding fell through at the last moment. It was not until after the surprise success of *Salvador* (1986), which did well on video despite being underpromoted, that he received solid backing for *Platoon*, and then only by Hemdale, a British-based operation.



Part of Stone's problem with getting the funding for *Platoon* had to do with Hollywood's suspicion that Vietnam War films were both too controversial and too economically risky. This notion began to take form while Stone himself was still serving in Vietnam. In 1967, John Wayne filmed *The Green Berets* at Fort Benning, Georgia. Released in 1968 after the Tet Offensive, the hawkish, pro-American film provoked a violent left-wing critical response. "Unspeakable ... stupid ... rotten ... false, vile and insane," commented Renata Adler in the *New York Times*. "Immoral racist," agreed Michael Korda in *Glamour*. "Childishly sleazy," added Frank Mararella in *Cinema Magazine*. Although the film found its audience and made money, Hollywood producers who did not have Wayne's clout with moviegoers decided that the war was simply too hot.

For the next decade, filmmakers treated the war as little more than a reference or a source of inspiration. The WAR – that bloody, passionate creature sitting in America's living room – was not mentioned. Then came the first tentative steps. In 1978, *Coming Home* and *The Deer Hunter* explored the mentality of soldiers returning from the war, with mixed critical and financial results. The same year, *Go Tell the Spartans*, a fine film, was all but ignored. In 1979, Francis Ford Coppola released *Apocalypse Now*, a film buried beneath so much myth and symbol that critics read it as both hawkish and dovish. Its profound ambivalence – or perhaps its psychological complexity – may have penetrated to the heart of war's darkness, but it failed to say much about the everyday nature of combat.

During the Reagan era, Hollywood retrieved, dusted off, and modestly updated stock war-film materials. Once again, combat became a heroic enterprise, corrupted only by politicians. The *Rambo* films and the *Missing in Action* series captured the big bucks. Americans wanted to watch winners, not agonize over what happened or why it happened. They desired action, not introspection; results, not meaning. They wanted heroes for their next wars, not victims of lost crusades.

But Oliver Stone had his own agenda, which smacked against the political currents of Hollywood and Washington. Much of *Platoon* is an echo, not only to the themes of *Apocalypse Now* but also to the antiwar literature of World War I. Sergeant Barnes, the scarred figure from both Stone's own tour in Vietnam and *Platoon*, recalls Hemingway's injured hero Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises*. And the use of Charlie Sheen as not only the protagonist but also the narrative guide serves the same purpose as Martin Sheen did in *Apocalypse Now*. The twin references announced that *Platoon* would explore both coming of age and the futility of modern war.

The strength of *Platoon* emerged from Stone's passion for and his palpable understanding of the subject. Like Hemingway, war was the defining experience in his life. He enlisted, he fought, he killed, he was injured; he believed, he questioned, he lost faith. He suffered the full range of emotions, entertained the gamut of thoughts. And when he turned to the subject, it was not like Francis Ford Coppola, Sylvester Stallone, or Chuck Norris, filmmakers and actors who embraced the war as a commercial vehicle rather than a biographical necessity. Stone, unlike others who depicted Vietnam on-screen, viewed the war as the central event not only in his life but also in the "soul" of America "and the world."

From the beginning of the *Platoon* project, he insisted on absolute realism. Anything less than fidelity would have betrayed his memory and experiences, although the U.S. Department of Defense refused to cooperate on the film because it believed that it

was a “totally unrealistic” depiction of the war. Stone maintained that the film was not about larger issues; it was about “boys in the field.” To ensure that his actors were as knowledgeable and competent as the real men of Bravo Company, he imposed a rigorous, two-week-long boot camp in the Philippine jungles under the dictatorial supervision of Captain Dale Dye, a twenty-year marine and a Vietnam veteran. Captain Dye subjected the cast to long marches with sixty-pound packs, cold army rations, and uncomfortable nights in foxholes, punctuated by sudden bursts of explosions to guarantee that no one would sleep. By the time filming began, the actors had the “tired, don’t-give-a-damn attitude” that Stone had hoped to achieve. In a short time, Stone and Dye had made soldiers out of actors.

To maintain faith with his past, Stone set *Platoon* in a real time and a real place – his time, his place. The film details the activities of 25th Bravo Company, operating near the Cambodian border, in 1967. The film’s central character, Chris Taylor (Charlie Sheen), views the war from a perspective similar to Stone’s. Like Stone, Taylor is a white, upper-middle-class kid who went to Vietnam to escape from the boredom and rigors of civilized life. His experiences in Vietnam mirror Stone’s – one reason why the film is so realistic and personal.

The film’s initial impression of Vietnam focuses on the landscape, perhaps the overriding presence in the film. It is, in the fullest sense, a world without vision, a land of eight-foot elephant grass, overgrown virginal forests, and lush jungles. It is a landscape that one needs a machete to hack through. Much of the tension of the film originates in its confining setting; danger always seems to threaten from behind the next tree.

Daily discomforts add to the tension. Stone’s Vietnam is a place where a grunt cannot relax. Mosquitoes swarm, ants bite, and leeches cling. Insects maintain a perpetual hum in the background, constantly reminding the viewer and the soldier of their presence. The product of a wealthy family, Chris finds it difficult to adjust to Vietnam’s fatal environment; he staggers under the weight of his pack, gags at the sight of a dead body, and attracts the ants and leeches like a magnet. Making matters worse, night seems to conspire with the harsh environment to deny rest to the weary Americans. Bombs explode, flares light up the sky, ambushers lurk everywhere. “You never really sleep,” observes Chris in a voice-over, as his year-long tour of Vietnam assumes the dimensions of an 8,760-hour day.

The language in *Platoon* is similarly authentic. Fresh soldiers are “cherries” and “newbies”; Vietnam is “the Nam,” and America is “the world”; pot smokers are “heads” that meet in the “underworld.” The film is also littered with obscenities, as Stone refused to pull any verbal punches. The music the soldiers listen to and the words they use reflect Stone’s own experiences. The use of Motown hits like “Tracks of My Tears” alongside country classics like “Okie from Muskogee” adds to the realistic aura and helps to divide the platoon into two hostile camps – the “heads” and the “juicers” – just as it was in Stone’s platoon. They are his people, “guys nobody really cares about” from small towns and villages, “the bottom of the barrel,” the undereducated and the uneducated.

It is in the realistic portrayal of the platoon itself that the film departs most radically from the traditional war genre. The classic World War II film upholds the ideal of the melting pot: out of many, one. Multiethnic, multi-religious, and multiregional, the platoon is a smorgasbord of Italians, Poles, and Irish; Protestants, Jews, and Catholics; Brooklyn sharpies, southern Rebs, and midwestern rubes. Yet they all pull together

toward a common goal. No such comfortable – and comforting – arrangement is present in *Platoon*. Stone observed a clear “moral division” in his platoon when he served in Vietnam, and Bravo’s cinematic counterpart is faithful to Stone’s memory. On a symbolic level, the film centers on the two sergeants, Elias and Barnes. For Barnes, all civilians are potential Vietcong and are liable to ruthless treatment. Elias, however, takes a more compassionate “hearts and minds” approach to the war. He wants to save Vietnam; Barnes merely wants to destroy the country.

But the platoon is split over more than war aims. Unlike traditional war films, Stone shows how race divided soldiers in Vietnam. In the base camp, African Americans are usually by themselves, shunted off to one side. Black soldiers are aware that they are being treated unfairly. One complains that they have to take extra turns on ambush patrol because of racial “politics,” and another objects to “always being fucked by the rich.” They are not, however, passive victims. Junior, a black grunt, for example, is not afraid to order Chris around. “Hey, white boy!” he shouts, before encouraging him to dig a foxhole with a little more enthusiasm. The only place blacks and whites can comfortably coexist is in the underworld, where, supervised by Sergeant Elias, they dance together in a drug-induced haze to the sounds of Smokey Robinson. In 1967, a year that saw vicious race riots in Detroit and other cities and heard former Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee chairman Stokely Carmichael call for a black revolution, race was as much of an issue in Vietnam as it was in America. Stone, unlike other filmmakers, brought this reality to the screen. By doing so, he added a deeper, more nuanced understanding of America.

Despite their divisions, soldiers have to pull together when they are in combat. It is in these sequences that Stone achieves the greatest sense of realism in the film. Stone’s war is the grunt’s war, a war without maps, red and blue arrows, or a grand design. Men fight because they are attacked, not for any lofty goal or territorial objective, and battles often end as inconclusively as they begin. In such contests, “winning” loses any elevated meaning; soldiers fight to survive. Period.

The mise-en-scène of the battle sequences underscores Stone’s idea of combat. His camera work captures Karl von Clausewitz’s notion of the “fog of war.” The camera becomes Chris’s eyes – jerking back and forth, seeing nothing distinctly, and blindly reacting to threats both perceived and real. Violence erupts suddenly and brutally, often without warning or meaning. Death and injury are neither noble nor ignoble, they just are. The best answer to the suffering and violence is given early in the film by Barnes. In true Hemingway fashion, he clamps his hand over a screaming, dying man and demands that he “take the pain.”

Premiering in New York and Los Angeles in December 1986, *Platoon* created an international sensation and propelled Stone into the forefront of American directors. *Time* proclaimed that Stone’s effort portrayed “Viet Nam as It Really Was,” and the *New York Times*’s Vincent Canby called the film “a succession of found moments” – that is, it had rediscovered the lost reality of the war. More importantly for Hollywood and Oliver Stone, *Platoon* was a massive commercial success as well. Made for a paltry \$6.5 million, the film grossed \$136 million in U.S. box office receipts. Video sales pushed the total gross to a staggering \$250 million. For now, Stone believed that he had exorcised the demons of Vietnam, and he looked forward to new projects. Having suddenly become a famous director, he planned to move to a lighter subject for his next film. In 1987, he remarked that he “would love to do a comedy.”

Had Oliver Stone been Francis Ford Coppola or even Sylvester Stallone, perhaps he could have jumped genres and made a quick transition to another project. But the whole point of *Platoon* was that it was not just a film project; it was Stone – his biography, his vision, his nightmare. He could no more set Vietnam aside than Hemingway could forget his war or Ahab abandon his whale. *Platoon* had not ended his dialogue with America about the war; it had only started it.

After *Platoon*, Stone made two movies, *Wall Street* and *Talk Radio*, before returning to Vietnam with a version of Ron Kovic's autobiography, *Born on the Fourth of July*. He had been interested in the project since 1980, but there was no money in Hollywood for a film about a paraplegic Vietnam veteran who discovers that all his country's cherished ideals are false and that the war in Vietnam was a sham. In a Hollywood marked by escape and fantasy, and a Washington following in lockstep, Kovic and Stone were as warmly embraced as repo men. They were pounding on the door, trying to get inside to claim their America, but nobody was at home. The financial success of *Platoon*, however, gave Stone the sledge he needed to break down the door.

*Born on the Fourth of July* centers on America's fatal flaw, the culture that conditions and indoctrinates young men to go to war. It is a brutal culture, life-hating, joy-denying, pleasure-destroying. In the film, Stone labors to subvert that culture, and by casting Tom Cruise in the lead, he moved far in that direction. By the mid-1980s, Cruise had become America's smile, the charming good-bad boy of *Top Gun* and *Risky Business*. Stone took Cruise's chiseled good looks and spit-shined image and caked them with mud. "Tom had the classical facial structure of an athlete," noted Stone. "He's the kid off a Wheaties box. I wanted to yank the kid off that box and mess with his image – take him to the dark side."

Seldom in the American cinema has the dark side initially seemed so benign. The opening sequences of the film are infused with a soft, golden light, and falling autumn leaves create a snow-globe effect. Everything about Kovic's Massapequa has a Norman Rockwell familiarity – small town and safe streets, boys playing war in the woods and men mouthing platitudes about the need to serve, rippling flags and firecrackers on the Fourth of July, baseball games and Yankee caps, wrestling matches and first loves. Kovic is his mother's "little Yankee Doodle Boy," born on the Fourth of July and raised with loving care. Yet something is out of whack in his comfortable, middle-class America. A parading World War II veteran flinches at the sound of an exploding firecracker, a coach's quest for victory borders on obsession, a mother's religious faith merges into zealotry. Kovic is taught not only to be upright, courteous, reverent, and clean but also that winning is everything, God hates quitters, communists are banging on our doors, and Uncle Sam needs you. As America's perfect son, he moves naturally from the Boy Scouts to the marines.

For Kovic and Stone, the culture of winning, violence, and unquestioning loyalty was America's dark side. It was a culture that despised softness and sensitivity and created a god out of John Wayne – in the book, Kovic writes that he resented having to give his "dead dick for John Wayne." These forces – family, community, school – imbued Kovic and Stone with a cold war mentality and the idea that manliness could be found only on a battlefield. The power of the culture makes Kovic's disillusionment all the more wrenching. After being wounded and returning home, he blames his country for making him go to Vietnam. "They told us to go," he cries, implicating the faceless establishment for perpetrating an immoral war.

Kovic's story also shows how easily this dark side can be foisted onto the next generation. As he rides through a crowd during a Fourth of July parade, his eyes come to rest on a boy who looks much as he once did. The child's Yankees cap and his toy gun suggest that little has changed since his own youth. By exposing America's dark side, Stone pushes his analysis of Vietnam beyond that presented in *Platoon*. Unlike *Platoon*, which made no effort to explain the larger issues behind the war, *Born on the Fourth of July* suggests that Vietnam, and war in general, are a product of America's own moral deficiencies, a theme that he would further explore in later films.

Kovic's and Stone's disillusionment is fueled by outrage, because they believed that they had been duped by their country's martial culture. The film implies that only the true believers, boys like Kovic born on the Fourth of July, evinced a willingness to fight and die for their country. Most of Kovic's high school classmates cannot understand why he wants to enlist; they do not feel particularly threatened by communists, and they are not moved by any overwhelming impulse to be "part of history." They seek only normal lives and a chance to prosper financially. When Kovic returns from Vietnam in a wheelchair, his friends have moved on with their lives. They are husbands, fathers, budding entrepreneurs, as distant as people can be from what he experienced on the other side of the world. Perhaps even more than his injuries, his friends' apathy gnaws at him. While he is consumed with the war, they could not care less. A hospital orderly tells him, "You can take your Vietnam and shove it up your ass." "They don't give a shit about the war," his friend Stevie adds. Even his mother switches the television station to *Laugh In* when a story about a Vietnam War protest comes on the news.

Stone shared Kovic's attitude toward America and his desire to shake his sleeping countrymen. The messages of *Born on the Fourth of July* are don't forget and get involved. America fought and lost the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time. It was a needless, senseless war, the product of a military culture and blind ideological faith. And unless Americans begin to question that culture and that faith, it will happen again. On this point, Stone and Kovic are products of the late 1960s and early 1970s political radicalization. Conservatives argue that protest movements had no effect. Stone disagreed. "That's why making *Born* was a particular thrill, 'cause it was flying in the face of that shit," he said. "People were outraged, I'd get letters saying ... there was no protest, no hatred, why are you bringing up all this divisiveness? But I remember the late '60s as a very rough time .... A lot of people can't face their past, you know."

Stone felt so strongly about the message of the film that he allowed it to interrupt the narrative flow. Most of the film deals with Kovic's coming to terms with the forces that shaped him, a struggle that is largely internal and intellectual. The film ends, however, with sketchy scenes of Kovic's political activism, and the manipulation of historical footage to put Cruise/Kovic at the 1972 Republican Convention contrasts sharply with the camera work of the rest of the film. But the transition from internal search to external activism – personal to political – is the message of *Born on the Fourth of July*.

Stone's concern for America's involvement in the war runs even deeper, however. It was not enough for the director just to show the impact of the war on an individual – on Ron Kovic, Chris Taylor, or Oliver Stone. It was not enough just to be the cinematic Hemingway of the Vietnam War. Stone wanted to be the war's historian as well.

As a historian of the war, Stone moves on two levels: personal and political. *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July* are primarily personal statements, though the political lurks beneath the surface. Both films were huge critical and commercial successes (*Born on the Fourth of July* was nominated for eight Academy Awards and won four, including an Oscar for Stone for best director).

*Heaven and Earth* (1994) is also largely a personal film of self-discovery, although it too has a historical and political message. The war, Stone says, was not only, or even mostly, about the United States. The overwhelming majority of people who were killed in the war were Vietnamese, and most of them were civilians. It was their land that was destroyed, their economy that was shattered, and their culture that was threatened with ruin. Stone commented that he made the film for two reasons – first, to explore the themes of Buddhist spirituality, reverence for ancestors, and respect for the land, and second, to respond to, in part, the blind militarism and mindless revisionism of the Vietnam War as typified by a certain odious brand of thinking that has snaked its way into our culture over the past decade or so, in which the conflict is refought in comic-book style by American superheroes, with a brand new ending ... we win! Within the moronic context of these ideas, hundreds of nameless, faceless, Vietnamese are blithely and casually shot, stabbed, and blown to smithereens, utterly without the benefit of human consideration. Entire villages are triumphantly laid to waste, with not one microsecond of thought or care given to those inside the little bamboo hamlets being napalmed. Who were they?

In his attempt to give “the reverse angle” of the war, Stone succeeds. He depicts Phang Thy Le Ly Hayslip’s world in loving detail, from the agricultural cycle to the serene beauty of the land to the peaceful stability of village and religious life. Seldom has a commercial filmmaker devoted so much attention to the undramatic nature of a third-world culture. When Stone finally turns his attention to Americans, he portrays them as rich, barbaric invaders. They intrude into the Vietnamese civil war, overlay it with an alien ideological meaning, then take it over, destroying or corrupting everything they touch. They disrupt nature by destroying entire villages, defoliating forests, and severing the rice cycle. American forces turn Le Ly’s “most beautiful village on earth” into a scene from Dante’s *Inferno*. Culturally, American capitalism corrupts the country, sending villagers to cities and bases where they become pimps, prostitutes, and black marketeers. Drawing not only on Le Ly’s memoirs but also on his own experiences as an MP, Stone is at his best when showing American GIs at their worst.

Stone even contends that Americans are at their worst when they are trying to be at their best. In one scene, South Vietnamese soldiers – American allies – use honey donated by the United States and angry ants to torture Le Ly. On a metaphoric level, Stone uses Steve Jones (Tommy Lee Jones) as the representative American. A twisted, misguided killer, Steve attempts to atone for his own sins by showering Le Ly with gifts and by taking her out of her natural environment and dropping her in the United States. But just as the relationship between the United States and the Republic of South Vietnam rotted, so the unnatural union of Steve and Le Ly turns exploitive and violent. Steve’s suicide reinforces Stone’s view of the results of the American mission in Vietnam.

*Heaven and Earth* differed from *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July* in its public reception. Expensive to make, it failed miserably at the box office. Production costs exceeded the combined costs of *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July*, but *Heaven and Earth* grossed only \$6 million in the United States. Although it was critically

applauded – one reviewer called it “Stone’s ultimate war film” – it failed to reach the audience the director intended it for. It had a message for all Rambo-cheering, Reagan-voting Americans, but few people paid it even passing attention.

After the success of *Born on the Fourth of July* and before the debacle of *Heaven and Earth*, Stone moved on to new topics. Instead of fulfilling his dream of making a comedy, he decided to catalogue the life of his musical hero, Jim Morrison. But even before *The Doors* was completed, he had laid the foundations for a bold return to the Vietnam genre. By the late 1970s, he had decided that the assassination of John F. Kennedy had drastically altered the course of the war and America’s future, but it was not until 1988, when book publisher Ellen Ray gave him a copy of Jim Garrison’s *On the Trail of the Assassins* in an elevator in Havana, that he became convinced that Lee Harvey Oswald had not acted alone. Stone devoured Garrison’s work, buying the rights to the book with his own money. He then immersed himself in the “serious research” required of any historian. He read every book on JFK and the assassination that he could lay his hands on and, along with screenwriter Zachary Sklar and Vietnam coproducer A. Kitman Ho, conducted over 200 interviews with conspiracy theorists and other people with knowledge of the case.

Stone’s conception of the film soon outgrew the mere circumstances of the assassination. “The central historical question” that courses through the movie centers on neither Jim Garrison nor the identity of the president’s killers. Instead, Stone used the murder as a means of exploring the event that was central to both his and, he believed, his nation’s life – Vietnam. In this way, he was building on issues he had explored in his previous films. *Platoon* was an autobiographical study that showed how the everyday horrors of the war affected a young man. *Born on the Fourth of July* carried the war home by examining how indifference, misunderstanding, and the perverted nature of American life affected Ron Kovic’s life. But now, Stone cast an even wider net. *JFK* is a biography of America since World War II, with Vietnam serving as the defining event for the period.

Stone begins *JFK* by rehabilitating the slain president’s image. A narrator informs the viewer that Kennedy represented “change and upheaval” in American government. We see Kennedy as he wanted to be seen, making conciliatory speeches toward the Soviets and frolicking with his family. Most importantly, we learn that Kennedy, through no fault of his own, found himself “embroiled” in a war in Southeast Asia. After the assassination, a stricken black maid, perhaps the mother of a grunt, sobs as she tells a reporter what “a fine man” Kennedy was. Meanwhile, Guy Banister (Ed Asner) cheers the killing, ripping Kennedy for letting the “niggers vote.” Those who supported and those who objected to Kennedy are neatly delineated. Stone seems intent on transforming Kennedy into the stained-glass hero that the Vietnam War never had.

Vietnam barely ripples the surface of the first half of the film. As New Orleans district attorney Jim Garrison (Kevin Costner) initially becomes obsessed with the assassination, there is little indication that the war plays a pivotal role in anything. Instead, the war appears, as it did in the mid-1960s, as background noise – always present, but rarely commented on. A brief clip shows Lyndon Johnson declaring his intent to vigorously prosecute the war. Another quick mention informs us that Johnson is asking for more money and more men to fight the war.

As Garrison unearths more information, however, Vietnam becomes increasingly central to the story. The pivotal scene comes when Garrison travels to Washington, D.C.,

to meet "Mr. X" (Donald Sutherland). Mr. X gives him the broader perspective that the DA could never have unearthed on his own. Mr. X cannot tell Garrison who killed Kennedy, although he suggests that top government officials were involved – when he refers to "the perpetrators" and calls the killing a "coup d'etat," Stone flashes images of LBJ. He can, however, give Garrison information on the more important issue – why "they" killed Kennedy. Kennedy had irritated powerful militarists with his refusal to invade Cuba and his decision to eliminate the CIA's power to conduct covert activities during peacetime. The central issue, however, was Vietnam. Kennedy wanted to pull out of Vietnam by 1965, a decision clearly unacceptable to the military and the big arms dealers, who stood to make a killing if the killing continued. Somehow, these forces colluded, perhaps in combination with others, to remove the offending executive and replace him with the more hawkish Johnson, who was "personally committed" to Vietnam. Once Kennedy was out of the way, the war could start "for real." Kennedy's murder and the continuation of the war marked the final triumph of the military-industrial complex, a powerful junta that could run roughshod over any elected official. The personalized war Stone presented in *Platoon* had thus grown into a critical event that marked a decisive shift in the power structure of the United States.

*JFK* was a mortar lobbed at the establishment, and it set off a firestorm of controversy. Many critics ignored Stone's central thesis, seizing instead on the idea that he had proposed a "grand conspiracy" involving the CIA, FBI, elements of the military, anti-Castro Cubans, New Orleans homosexuals, the Dallas police department, and God only knows who else. Others blasted Stone for lionizing Garrison, who had, in real life, used some questionable methods (including truth serum and questioning hypnotized subjects) to gather his evidence, and for presenting speculation and composite figures as factual. Indeed, *JFK* attains the highest level of realism in any of Stone's films. As in *Platoon*, the camera acts as an eye, as fallible as any human's. The camera jerks as we see something out of the corner of our eye. Did we really see what we thought was there? Stone never provides an answer. Further, Stone has mastered the technique (first seen in the 1972 Republican Convention scene in *Born on the Fourth of July*) of combining documentary and new footage into a seamless unity. His realistic approach went too far for many of his detractors, one of whom referred to *JFK* as "the cinematic equivalent of rape."

Stone responded to the furor surrounding his film. He was willing to give way on most issues. He freely admitted that *JFK* was intended as "entertainment" and that he had taken "dramatic license" with the facts. *JFK* was not supposed to tell the truth about the assassination; Stone simply wanted to present a "paradigm of possibilities" that would point out the shortcomings of the Warren Commission's report. He noted where he had fictionalized or created composite characters and agreed that he had made his Garrison "better" than the real person. He was even willing to negotiate his portrayal of Kennedy. Stone was aware of Kennedy's faults – the pattern of "sex" and "drug use" that marked his life, his "stealing the election in '60," and his penchant for saying "one thing to the public" and doing "another thing behind their backs." In his defense, Stone correctly maintained that three hours was insufficient time to fully develop Kennedy's character and that, in any case, there was "a larger issue at stake." On the "larger issue," however, Stone would not budge. He continued to insist that, had Kennedy lived, he would have ended the Vietnam War. Stone firmly believed



that Kennedy had been reevaluating Vietnam and the cold war throughout 1963. Citing national security memoranda and statements made by Robert McNamara, Kennedy's secretary of defense, Stone claimed that Kennedy was only waiting to be reelected before withdrawing from Southeast Asia. Instead, he was murdered, thus putting "an abrupt end to a period of innocence and great idealism."

Though passionately and eloquently argued, Stone's position, however ardently held, does not stand up to scrutiny. There was, in fact, little to suggest that Kennedy wanted to end either Vietnam or the cold war, unless it was on America's terms. The conciliatory speeches that Stone quotes were anomalous. Even the speech he was to give in Dallas on November 22, 1963, took a hardline stance on communism. McNamara may have believed that Kennedy would have pulled out of Vietnam (even though he wrote to Kennedy in October 1963 that the "security of South Vietnam" was "vital to United States security"), but Kennedy advisers McGeorge Bundy and Robert Kennedy did not. Only three weeks before he was killed, Kennedy approved the overthrow of South Vietnam's president, Ngo Dinh Diem, on the grounds that a new government was needed to save South Vietnam from communism. Kennedy's National Security Memorandum (NSAM) 263, which Stone cites, did call for the withdrawal of 1,000 U.S. troops, but this was merely giving notice to Diem that the United States was not pleased with his corrupt regime. At no point did Kennedy plan to abandon Vietnam. Lyndon Johnson's NSAM 273, which Stone claimed was a radical departure from Kennedy's position, was nothing of the sort. In fact, the document appears in *The Pentagon Papers* as an "Order by Johnson Reaffirming Kennedy's Policy on Vietnam" and stated that the United States' "objectives" remained identical to those stated by Kennedy.

If Stone has been flexible on other issues, why does he remain so steadfast in his assertion that Kennedy would have ended the Vietnam War? To do otherwise would be to undermine all that he has done in the last twenty years. In his films, he has constructed an explanation for an unexplainable war, reducing a complex swirl of ideology and global politics to a simple cause-and-effect relationship. Further, his theory supports his contention that the war had "no moral purpose." In *JFK*, Vietnam resulted from the cowardly murder by a group of vicious, power-hungry warmongers of a benevolent "king" who was trying to bring peace to the world. A more despicable beginning could hardly be imagined, tainting the war with evil before it even began in earnest. Finally, placing Kennedy's death within the context of Vietnam gives Stone and other veterans a hero in a war without acknowledged heroes. Kennedy represents the only hope that America could escape from the clutches of "the Beast" that has held the reins of power since 1963. If Kennedy did not offer hope in the 1960s, what chance is there that any future leader would be inclined to give power back to the people?

In showing how a corrupted American society created Vietnam, Stone returned to the theme of *Born on the Fourth of July*. In earlier films, he showed how a culture of violence, manifested in both public and private institutions, caused one young man to go to war. *JFK* maintains the same image of America but makes a quantum leap in interpretation. Instead of exploring the effects of this culture on one person, he demonstrates how one manifestation of violence affected the course of the entire nation. Whereas Chris Taylor and Ron Kovic may have been naive individuals with no direct relation to viewers, the events in *JFK*, with Vietnam as its centerpiece, implicate all Americans who remain complacent and refuse to challenge the system.

Having, for the first time, explored the origins of the Vietnam War and situated it within a particular view of how American history operates, Stone was prepared to show how the war ended. Although it is impossible to say what he will do in the future, it may be that *Nixon* will mark Stone's final cinematic statement on the war. Although *Nixon* lacks some of the stridency of his earlier films, it reinforces the themes posited by Stone's other Vietnam War films. Instead of merely discussing the end of the war, he continues his bold explorations of the conflict's impact on both American and global history.

Even while he was president, Richard Nixon had intrigued Stone. Stone saw his father in the blunt and withdrawn executive, and the shame of Watergate helped turn Stone into a critic of America. Nixon, along with Kennedy, "shaped the era in which [he] grew up," and Stone eagerly plunged into the task of bringing the story of "the dominant figure in the latter part of this century" to the screen. Again, as with *JFK*, he engaged in the basic research required of any historian. He read "everything there was" on the ex-president and spoke with many of the people who would be portrayed on-screen. Stone also listened to some of Nixon's presidential tapes that had not yet been released to the public. Still smarting from critics' accusations that he had created characters and evidence for *JFK*, Stone released an advance copy of the script for *Nixon*, complete with hundreds of footnotes listing books, interviews, tapes, and oral histories.

At over three hours, *Nixon* is a lengthy yet compelling portrait of a complex politician. Stone's Nixon (Anthony Hopkins) is a master of detail, yet prone to confusion; a caring yet cold person; a man with a bold vision of the future who is haunted by the past. Nixon's greatest demon is the memory of JFK. Nixon resents Kennedy as only a hardscrabble, self-made man can resent a person who has been handed everything. At the same time, he maintains that he and the man from Massachusetts were like "brothers." Not content to merely expose this contradiction, Stone digs deep to explore the roots of Nixon's guilt, suggesting that he was indirectly responsible for Kennedy's death. Nixon, he says, was in charge of a program called "Track Two," a covert program to assassinate Fidel Castro, and may also have been involved in the Bay of Pigs in some way. By participating in this effort, Nixon unwittingly helped create the culture of violence that, as detailed in *JFK*, led to Kennedy's death and, as seen in *Born on the Fourth of July*, inspired Ron Kovic and others to go to war.

Although there is no evidence that Nixon knew of the plot to kill Kennedy, Stone shows him near the scene of the crime and explicitly links Kennedy's death to the Vietnam War. In the film, we see Nixon in Dallas in November 1963, meeting with a group of far-right businessmen headed by Jack Jones (Larry Hagman). As Nixon uncomfortably banter with high-class prostitutes, Jones and others urge Nixon to run for president in 1964. The wealthy businessmen are displeased with how Kennedy is handling Vietnam and promise Nixon "a shit-pot" of money and a victory in the South in exchange for a more militant foreign policy. Nixon demurs, claiming that Kennedy is unbeatable. But what if, one of the extremists asks, Kennedy does not run in 1964? Nixon is unnerved by the implications of this statement and beats a hasty retreat. Although he was clearly not responsible for Kennedy's death, Nixon's association with the forces that killed the president haunted him. Stone beautifully captures this mood by drenching the White House in a stormy, almost gothic atmosphere. In a very real sense, *Nixon* assumed the quality of a horror film.

Besides deepening his explanation of the causes of the war, Stone continues to expand his vision of how the war affected the world. *JFK* treats Vietnam as an event of national importance. *Nixon*, however, goes beyond this, and shows how the war played a critical role in the development of the global cold war. At times, *Nixon* seems to prosecute the war solely to save his own bruised masculinity; he refuses to be pushed around by a smaller country. But, for the first time, we also see how Vietnam was but one aspect of a larger scene; Nixon refuses to back down in the face of a communist alliance. When he is in control of events, Nixon realizes that he has to continue to vigorously prosecute the war in order to gain concessions from the Soviets and the Chinese. He is successful in this endeavor. Stone shows Nixon's success in his meetings with Mao Zedong and Leonid Brezhnev. But, he argues, simply demonstrating Vietnam's importance in international politics does not make it a worthwhile war. Instead, Vietnam is reduced to a mere pawn in a global game. In January 1968, Private Stone's platoon acted as human bait to draw out a larger Vietnamese force. Other Vietnam veterans served the same purpose, only their job was to lure the world's major communist countries into negotiations with the United States. In Stone's view, the war was a chess game with one king and many pawns.

Finally, the Vietnam War comes to a close. It does not, however, reach either a glorious end or a satisfying resolution. After learning that the North Vietnamese are prepared to sign a treaty, an exhilarated Nixon calls a press conference to announce the conclusion of a successful war. He believes that he has finally negotiated a "peace with honor" and is prepared to join the country in celebration. But the press conference quickly turns hostile. One reporter challenges the president, claiming that the last several years of the war accomplished nothing, that the terms Nixon got were little different from those offered in 1968. As the president stammers, reporters bombard him with questions. Much to his surprise, they are less interested in the end of the war than in the breaking Watergate scandal. Vietnam has become a footnote in the history of the cold war. For Nixon and America, the war did not end so much as just fade away. There were no parades, no celebrations, and, for Stone and others, no closure. This stands as the final insult for a generation of soldiers and forced at least one to begin writing about his experiences. The lack of closure in 1973 led Stone to follow a twenty-year-long path to find redemption. In ending the war on-screen, Stone has taken us to the beginning of his own life as a filmmaker.

In a 1991 *Rolling Stone* interview, journalist David Breskin asked Oliver Stone if he felt like a great artist. "I never doubted it, from day one," Stone replied. "When I was eighteen, I just felt like I had a call .... And living up to that call has been the hardest part." From the first, Vietnam was an integral part of that calling. As a nineteen-year-old, he began a long, sprawling manuscript entitled "A Child's Night Dream." As a twenty-three-year-old film student at NYU, his first picture was entitled *Last Year in Vietnam*. At the age of forty, his first great commercial success as a director was *Platoon*. The circle closed eleven years later when *A Child's Night Dream*, heavily edited and slimmed down, was published by St. Martin's Press. The link between the nineteen-year-old would-be Hemingway and the fifty-one-year-old established artist was a passion for America's involvement in Vietnam – why we went, how we fought, what were the results and the implications.

In the process of becoming an artist, Stone also became the most successful and controversial historian of the war. For him, the past had an irresistible pattern, one

woven with lost opportunities, conspiracies, fallen heroes, personal biographies, and impersonal forces. "I'm looking for a very difficult pattern in our history," he said. "What I see in 1963, with Kennedy's murder at high noon in Dallas, to 1974, with Nixon's removal, is a pattern." It is a pattern of promise and betrayal, vision and death, from John and Robert Kennedy to Martin Luther King, Jr., and Richard Nixon. "These four men came from different political perspectives, but they were pushing the envelope, trying to lead America to new levels. We posit that, in some way, they pissed off what we call 'the Beast,' the Beast being a force (or forces) greater than the presidency."

Stone's burden is to be history's witness. For him, the past is a very real, painful, and unresolved phenomenon. Like William Faulkner, he believes that "the past is never dead." In fact, "it's not even past." But Stone's view of history contains inherent problems. It indicts an entire culture but suggests that members of that culture can make a lasting difference. For example, in *Born on the Fourth of July*, Stone contends that a martial culture packed Ron Kovic off to Vietnam, but in *JFK* he argues that Kennedy would have ended the war and that his promise died with him. But on a higher level, Stone realizes that the duty of the historian is to keep the past alive. It is the tension between his desire to teach and entertain and his desire to be taken seriously as an arbiter of the past that makes Stone such a controversial figure. Always reluctant to accept the work of popular historians (which Stone certainly is), academics have resisted embracing his vision of the past. And yet, his Vietnam films seem to have touched a nerve in the American public. To his credit, as his fame has grown, he has consistently adopted more sophisticated methods of exploring the past. Beginning in 1986 with an insulated, autobiographical view of history, Stone has expanded his analysis to incorporate the broader themes and movements that lay behind his own experience in Vietnam. In doing this, he uses the methods of a professional historian, going so far as to issue footnotes to accompany his work. Still, Stone remains true to his vision above all else; the details must be subservient to the big picture, the facts must support the conclusion. As Stone wrote, "Elie Wiesel reminds us that survivors are all charged with a sacred mission: to serve as witnesses and teachers of what they suffered, thereby preventing such catastrophes from occurring again." It is this goal, this quest for relevance, that drives Oliver Stone's pursuit of the past, separates his work from that of academic historians, and forces Americans to decide which is more important: a truthful rendition of the facts, or facts rendered in such a way as to illustrate the truth.