

"Over My Shoulder"

by

Steve H Kehoe

"John, I want you to get away from this madhouse, these reporters, uh, and go up to Camp David for the weekend. And I want you to write up a report, uh, I want you to put everything you know about Watergate in there!" With these words, President Richard M. Nixon vainly hoped to sidestep what was becoming an ever-tightening noose around his neck. He even referred to the crisis as "Watergate", using the very term that the hostile press had begun using eighteen months prior-not referring to the Washington D.C. hotel-THE Watergate-but to the unfolding drama that was to dismember his presidency in a fashion no less macabre than an Greek Tragedy. The "John" he was addressing was young and at one time overtly naïve presidential counsel John Dean (played youthfully by David Hyde Pierce), who, along with his lovely blonde wife "Mo" (Maureen), had cut quite a figure in the unassailable Washington social set up to then. Sensing that he was being "set up" a la a potential scapegoat for the bizarre-and still explainable, hoped RMN-Dean summoned his courage and flatly declared "Sir, I'm not going to be the scapegoat for this". Then he uttered the next sentence which de facto declared that there was indeed something-lots-to hide: "Haldeman and Ehrlicman are in just as deep as me. The grammar and the syntax might not have been befitting a Washington lawyer, but the meaning of those few words came shining through like dew on the morning prairie grass in Montana. These four-and more-were indeed "in just as deep"-oh, what a tangled web, etc....

Moviemaker Oliver Stone, whom this writer has vilified in an earlier column for letting his personal feelings interfere, nay, dictate, the tenor of his 1991 epic film "J.F.K." rose above any demons or feelings he might have carried inside his mind when it came to accurately portraying Mr. Nixon in his brilliant (yes, I said "brilliant") 1995 film, "Nixon". (author's note: See! I stated in my earlier column that I would recognize Stone's greatness in making "Nixon", as contrasted with the liberties he took when making "J.F.K.") In point of fact, there were some "liberties" taken in the making of "Nixon", but they were in the main inconsequential, and not inhibitive of the story arcs.

To wit: (1) When RMN signs his letter resigning the presidency, he did not do it at the beckoning of or in the presence of Alexander Haig (played by Powers Booth). He only signed the letter after his nighttime address to the nation, a rambling discourse if ever there was one, in which he cited the saintly qualities of his late mother, and the work ethic of his Quaker father in scraping out a living in Whittier, California as a grocer. (2) "The whole world is watching!" This shouted epithet occurred in Chicago, at the 1968 Democratic National Convention-as mayor Richard (something about that name.....) M. Daley turned loose the Chicago police on the youthful demonstrators, who, other than being loud, had not committed any crimes. In the film, Stone has the demonstrators railing at the '68 Republican convention in Miami-where Nixon was nominated nearly by acclamation on his "return to law and order" platform. (3) The use of sound effects of a crackling fire, when in point of fact, the room in which Nixon was pondering had a gas fireplace. What possible use could Stone have made of simulating a real wood-burning fire? He had already shown the imbalance in Nixon's mind by having Haig observe first the fireplace, then the air conditioner being on! (4) The trip to the ranch to meet with the wealthy and powerful Texas ranchers ("Jack Jones" played by Larry Hagman) had yellow side markers. None such existed on rural roads in Texas at that time. (5) When Nixon traveled to Dallas in November 1963 as paid counsel to Studebaker Motors, the announcer was touting "It's for you, it's for me!

It's Studebaker for 1963!" when in point of fact, in November of 1963-they would have been introducing their 1964 model cars!

Hmmmmmm. Might explain why "Studes" are no longer in the market? Naw! The "President" (large Studebaker sedan-how ironic the name!!) was a helluva comfortable car with zip to spare, and got an incredible (for the time) 25 mpg.

Anthony Hopkins as Nixon played perhaps his second-finest role, next to Hannibal Lector in "Silence of the Lambs"-and to some, no less terrifying, for different reasons: Power instead of madness. But doesn't power lead sometimes to madness? Shakespeare believed it so. Would not Nixon the man be a perfect, if somewhat flawed, example of that volte-face? Joan Allen plays Pat Nixon to a "T"...loathing politics, and uttering to eldest daughter Julie while watching with contempt the crowds below their hotel window: "I just will not buckle to these people!" Supporting cast members, especially the enigmatic Fyvus Finkel as his campaign manager, were miniature shining gems, as well, adding to the feeling of "being there" for the viewer. Episodes of Nixon's presidency, especially his flight to China to confer with Chairman Mao, were portrayed historically correct as the shining moments they truly were, and Paul Sorvino as Henry Kissinger completely mastered the rough tenor and dialogue of the Secretary of State. Other star performances were turned in by E.G. Marshall, playing the beleaguered Atty. Gen. John Mitchell, Ed Harris as Watergate master "burglar" E. Howard Hunt, and James Woods as H.R. Haldeman. The contempt for the American public came shining through like the morning dew on the Montana prairie grass (Wait! I already used that image! Run that take back!)

Most impressive of all is Stone's use of black and white (for realism) flashbacks to Nixon's formative years-his growing up under a hard disciplinarian father and a bible-beating Quaker mother, along with two sick brothers who died of tuberculosis. One actually can relate and empathize with the bewildered young Richard, who tries to hard to not only obey but idolize his mother, Hannah Nixon (played eerily well by Mary Steenburgen), and stay clear of his father's wrath. One poignant scene concerns his mother's near-clairvoyant knowledge of his older brother Harold's secreting a corn silk "cigarette" to young Richard, and his initial lying about having received it. Under his mother's gentle prodding for the truth, Richard is bound to admit his guilt, and succeeds in obtaining his mother's promise not to tell his father, lest he get "a trip to the woodshed". One senses that in a flash-forward, the American people are about to take RMN to the woodshed-or worse! Nixon's failure as a football player at Whittier is highlighted, as is his volunteering to drive Pat Ryan (future wife) on a date with someone else just to be near her. I mean, the man underwent tons of personal humiliation-later on declaring, when compared to Jack Kennedy, that he "went to the wrong school" and wasn't socially acceptable even in the nation's capital, while the public idolized and nearly worshipped the memory of their charismatic, murdered leader: JFK. Nixon roamed the halls in the White House late at night staring at the Lincoln and then the Kennedy portraits, declaring in soliloquy his inability to fathom why they were so revered and yet he was so despised. Crying, he wails "Why do they hate me so much?" Sadly, the man never quite figured out the answer to that-if there indeed is one. In direct contrast to the way the press in general went out of their way to protect Nixon's

predecessor-till facts came out years later that "our hero" had extramarital affairs not only with Marilyn Monroe-that he shared with his brother Bobby-but even his female staff (remember "Fiddle" & "Faddle"?) the press went after Richard Milhous Nixon like a cougar on a rabbit, never letting go, and seeking every opportunity to destroy the man-and he gave them plenty of fuel for their fires! The supreme irony is that history will record him well for "re-opening" China to the world, but will vilify him for his misadventures vis-à-vis Watergate, and his escalation of the bombing in the Vietnam War, along with his secret missions in Cambodia and Laos-which did nothing to hasten the end of the conflict until he finally unleashed the B-52s and carpet-bombed North Vietnam, forcing them at last to the peace table in Paris in January of 1973. By that time he was so hated by the public that even his announcement that the war was coming to a close was met with disinterest and a total lack of applause, save from his staff.

"Nixon"-get it from Netflix-is Oliver Stone's capstone insofar as a masterpiece of film-making, in that it shows how a man can achieve greatness, yet, due to his inability to shake his personal demons, sees it all slip away 'til he retires from the arena in disgrace. I rate it a 9.5 out of ten, easily. And, as mentioned, he certainly redeemed himself in this writer's eyes for the hubris he displayed in making "that other movie".

Nixon: The only man to retire from his position more times than Bret Favre.

Steve H Kehoe
MU66@etex.net