

W: A crude approach is not good for grasping much of anything

By David Walsh
22 October 2008

Directed by Oliver Stone, screenplay by Stanley Weiser

W. is veteran American director Oliver Stone's film about the life and career of President George W. Bush. It was shot and edited rapidly for release while Bush was still in office. The November 4 election was no doubt a consideration as well.



Josh Brolin as George W. Bush in *W.*

The film is a collection of episodes, broadly written and performed, following Bush from his student days at Yale to the disastrous turn that the Iraq war took for the US in 2003-2004. *W.* contains two time frames—the first treats Bush's earlier life impressionistically, offering glimpses of him over the course of several decades; the second, dealing with his first years in the White House, dwells at greater length on the run-up to the invasion of Iraq.

The pivot of the film occurs in 1986, around the time of his 40th birthday, when Bush "sees the light" and becomes a reborn Christian. The film takes seriously the notion that he conquered his inner demons and made something of himself.

A theme throughout is Bush's conflict and rivalry with his father, George H. W. Bush, congressman, CIA director, vice president and, ultimately, president from 1989 to 1993. We first see the youthful Bush (Josh Brolin), 20 or so, when he's being hazed at a Yale University fraternity house. Later, Bush phones his father (James Cromwell)—now a congressman—from jail, and receives a warning that this had better be the last such incident.

Intercut with that material are scenes of the Bush White House, and in particular, the debate over a prospective war with Iraq following the events of September 2001. Vice President Dick Cheney (Richard Dreyfuss) and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz (Dennis Boutsikaris) are the most ardent advocates of an invasion, countering the skepticism and reluctance of Secretary of State Colin Powell (Jeffrey Wright).

The young Bush carries on, from one escapade to another, eventually meeting his future wife, Laura (Elizabeth Banks), in 1977. Defeated in a run for Congress by a populist Democrat, Bush promises "never to be out-Texased again." In 1986, he moves to Washington, and experiences his conversion. A huckster evangelist, Earle Hudd (Stacy Keach), presides over Bush's change of heart.

Switching once again to the more recent past, Stone's film presents Cheney delivering a lecture on Iraqi and Iranian oil reserves, pointing to the region and the Straits of Hormuz in particular as the "chokepoint of

civilization."

The film cuts back in time again, and we see Bush senior presiding over the Gulf War in 1991, making the decision, with which his son disagrees, not to march on Baghdad. George W. announces his plan to run for governor of Texas in 1994, much to his family's consternation.

In 1999, he tells his preacher-advisor, "God wants me to run for president." We jump to 2003 and the fraudulent claims about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and the Hussein regime's efforts to get hold of "yellow cake" uranium ore from Niger. Finally, the invasion occurs and Bush announces "mission accomplished" in May. The fiasco then unfolds.

Oliver Stone has never been a subtle director. He perceives himself, it seems, as someone who strives to treat a given subject in broad strokes. Stone told an interviewer from *GQ* magazine that, like George W. Bush, he has the tendency not to want "to pay too much attention to details."

The director possesses a lively vulgarity, which he applies to glaringly public and intimate moments alike. Occasionally, this is effective and attractive; here, more often than not, however, it is not.

The references to Bush's fascination with baseball and his aspiration to become the professional sport's commissioner seem about right. He and the world might have been happier. A final scene, in which now-President Bush is unable to answer a simple question from a reporter, as to whether he had made any mistakes or done any soul-searching, is telling. These moments are exceptions.

Malice doesn't seem the clue to the problems in *W.* so much as great confusion, and ignorance of American social realities.

It is a fallacy to imagine that a crude approach can adequately grasp a crude subject. In general, a crude approach is not good for grasping much of anything. Because Bush is an extremely limited human being doesn't mean that his life and advancement are not bound up with complex questions, or even that his own psychology is an open book. Stone, unhappily, seems most at home with moments of drunkenness, backwardness, unconsciousness. He revels in and savors them.

Stone's and screenwriter Stanley Weiser's Bush is an eternal frat boy, living in the shadow of his father. He's essentially well-intentioned, if unevolved, amiable, but prone to angry outbursts, impulsive. Brolin does an effective impersonation of the public Bush, but it's not clear that we are much further in the direction of understanding the man who would become America's 43rd president.

The film catches largely at externals, in its look, feel and social perceptions. As always, a good deal of effort has gone into making certain that hairdos, clothes, automobiles and furniture correspond to the respective eras.

To explain Bush's trajectory, as *W.* does, largely on the basis of his unresolved conflict with his father begs the question. Many people have such battles, many, alas, also "find Jesus" at present, many leave off drinking—very, very few are elevated to the White House.

It's true that *W.* makes obligatory reference to other questions: the pursuit of Iraq's oil reserves, for example. In relation, however, to the

significance of that issue and its consequences—I million or more Iraqis killed, thousands of Americans dead and wounded, a country ruined, a region driven to the brink of a wider war—the scene is relatively perfunctory and formulaic. Cheney is filmed from a distance, and the moment is not likely to linger in the memory.

This isn't what Stone feels most deeply or what interests him, in the end. What's placed in the foreground, in almost perpetual, warts-and-all close-up, are Bush the younger's relations with his father and family. The sequences in the White House, the discussions of war and torture, are fairly flat and unevocative. The film gets its adrenaline pumping almost exclusively during the intra-family squabbles.

Neither element is entirely convincing, because a deeper grasp of the relation *between* Bush's personality, his family and the larger world of American politics social life eludes the director and screenwriter.

Stone framed his film to an interviewer from the *Guardian* in the following manner: "How did Bush go from an alcoholic bum to the most powerful figure in the world?" He continued: "He had tremendous personal problems, and I have to give him enormous credit—he did overcome them, through willpower. Whether he solved them is another issue, but he overcame certain states of mind."

This, to put it politely, is inadequate. To put its shallowness in context, one must consider Stone's background.

Born to privilege in a staunchly Republican family, and a fellow student of Bush's at Yale in the 1960s, Stone enlisted in the military and volunteered for combat in Vietnam. The experience shattered and changed him. To his credit, he translated that into two films hostile to US imperialism's intervention in Southeast Asia, *Platoon* (1986) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989).

Vietnam and related events knocked Goldwater Republicanism out of Stone and propelled him toward the "counter-culture" and various strands of protest and liberalism, and hedonism, but it did not equip him with a coherent and profound understanding of American class society. This is not entirely his fault. The intellectual laziness and evasiveness of the New Left and the anti-war protest movement could not have provided such an insight, nor did they have any desire to.

Stone is something of a lost soul, alienated from his social and ideological roots, but never finding his way to a more substantial and politically informed opposition to American capitalism. He is congenitally all over the place; indeed, one might say, that is his life's vocation.

His comments about *W.* wander here and there, and few of them indicate any grasp of the questions involved in the effort to bring Bush's life accurately and meaningfully to the screen.

"It's not a political film," Stone told *Maxim* magazine, "but a Shakespearean one. It's a film about George W. rebelling against his father, doing better than his father, believing that he's stronger than his father, and outdoing his father...and it's about the colossal mistakes he made and the lies he told. In a way it's Oedipal. One can say he did kill the father because he did destroy the legacy, the name. It's a big thing with the Bushes."

In passing, the same interviewer can note that Stone "has little sympathy for Bush, who he says is responsible for tens of thousands of needless deaths abroad and the corrosion of civil liberties at home and the fortune of future generations squandered." The director, however, tells the interviewer from *GQ* that the film is "light," prompting the question, "Wait, are you saying this movie is a comedy?," to which Stone replies: "Well, it has to be done with an ebullience and a certain fun, because the guy is goofy. He's a goofball!"

The inconsistency and unseriousness are not Stone's alone, they are shared by a wide layer of pragmatic middle class iconoclasts and critics in the US, who lament this or that feature of American life, even warn histrionically about incipient "fascism," and then go about their daily business complacent as clams.

That George W. Bush is an empty vessel would not be disputed by many thinking people. But how, the filmmakers might have asked themselves, is it possible that American capitalism placed its fortunes in the hands of such a lowlife?

No serious reference is made to the ultra-right forces that pushed Bush forward, the same forces responsible for the Clinton sex scandal and impeachment drive. Stone, in a peculiar manner, takes the Bush "success story" at face value. No doubt Bush junior had his conscious or semiconscious motives, but what driving forces, as Marxists know to ask, stood behind those motives and by what social elements was he picked up?

A more plausible explanation than the time-worn Oedipal story is that Bush was merely a front man for more conscious and politically motivated forces, with a wide-ranging and reactionary agenda at home and abroad. Painted as amiable and down-to-earth by the media, partial to vague "values," supposedly conservative but "compassionate," with a well-known family name, Bush was directed toward the White House; he had relatively little to do with the matter. No doubt, if he had not stopped drinking and carousing, the opportunity would have been closed to him, but that is about the most one can say of his "overcoming" his "personal problems."

The deterioration in the political representatives of the ruling elite is a function, in the final analysis, of the decline in its fortunes and prospects. George W. Bush's ascension to prominence speaks to the terminal crisis of American capitalism. Now a cosmetic change may be necessary, but Bush was no accident: he represented accurately the dominant section of the US establishment—arrogant, shortsighted and criminal to the core.

Some of those same forces, chastened by the experience, are now endorsing Sen. Barack Obama in an effort to compensate for their sin.

Stone and Weiser sacrifice art and truth to narrow political concerns. Scandalously, they make no mention of Bush's presiding over 153 executions as governor of Texas, in one case mocking a woman's pleas for mercy. The deep sadism of the man is missing. Nor is the hijacking of the 2000 election treated. In both cases, no doubt scenarist and director sought to avoid "partisan" and "controversial" issues, which would have brought the right-wing media down on their heads. As a result of Stone's ideological blindness or, not to mince words, political cowardice, the full picture of the man and his period is not here.

Along the same lines, Stone portrays Bush the elder as a stern and honorable figure, when, in fact, he was (and is) a corrupt, greedy representative of the ruling elite, and as CIA director, up to his elbows in blood. The filmmakers also, in passing, canonize Colin Powell as a voice of moderation, entirely undeservedly. The chief diplomatic liar for the Bush administration and a war criminal in his own right, Powell developed public differences only after he saw that the Iraq war was going badly.

All in all, Stone and Weiser have no historical or sociological purchase on Bush. Such an understanding wouldn't preclude individual psychology; on the contrary, it would create the context in which those private relations would take on real, full-bodied life. That opportunity was not taken.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>