

television

‘America? It’s the Darth Vader of the world’

The Russians were the true victors of the Second World War; the US persists as an imperialist aggressor, and bin Laden deserved a trial. As film director Oliver Stone’s new series comes to TV, Tim Teeman gets a lesson in history

No sooner have I asked the movie director Oliver Stone and the history professor Peter Kuznick about criticism of their book and TV series *The Untold History of the United States* than Stone is shaking his head, tutting grandly and instructing Kuznick to “show him, show him”. Kuznick proffers, with a flourish, a full page of plaudits, including one that makes them beam most: “There is much here to reflect upon” (Mikhail Gorbachev).

Both book and TV series — the latter called *Oliver Stone’s Untold History of the United States* — analyse “what America has done wrong, in the hope it can change”, says Stone, director of *Platoon* and *JFK*, in his husky voice, a vivid red scarf wrapped around his neck.

Two years ago Stone, a magnet for controversy, apologised after claiming a “Jewish-dominated media” focused on the Holocaust. Now he’s condemning the rapacious “empire building” of the US, which has warmongered for power and profit, and — in the cause of American exceptionalism — negated its potential as a force for good. “What is untold for me — and I was born after the atomic bomb was dropped, the Cold War was my youth — was the truth that the Russians were the main victors of World War Two and paid the highest price.”

Stone means the 27 million dead that the pair attribute to the war, although one critic claimed that between one and five million could be attributed to Stalin’s brutality. Stone and Kuznick claim that Truman was an aggressor and the Japanese were about to surrender before the US dropped the Bomb. “The US did that as a strong, barbaric statement to the Russians,” says Stone. “You can’t f*** with the United States. We control the world and kill people.” His eyes glitter, the swaggering Stone replaces sober tutor: “That’s just the f***ing first three episodes!”

In the week of the tenth anniversary of the start of the Iraq war, Stone is strong in his condemnation: “It’s been a tremendous setback for our country, a national trauma. Obama has continued the lie that this is American military service abroad without any selfish motive, that it has everything to do with 9/11.”

What was Iraq about, for Stone? “God knows,” he laughs. “It was a plan definitely with its eyes on the prize, beginning with [former Vice-President Dick] Cheney’s on Iraq’s oil and gas reserves.” Iraq represented “a very dangerous continuation of the neon plan to penetrate the Middle East”.

In their most contentious chapter, Stone and Kuznick say that had the left-wing Henry Wallace, Vice-President under Roosevelt, become President rather than Truman, “the Cold War, Vietnam, arms race, Iraq and Afghanistan” may not have unfolded; the book sweeps through Reagan’s consolidation of the US military-industrial complex and Obama’s failure to keep his promise to “change” America. “Obama’s



‘You could tell you were tearing wounds into a country. It was horrible, frightening’

a wolf in sheep’s clothing,” Stone says.

He and Kuznick may have received praise from Gorbachev and many others, but their revisionism has also been criticised. The biggest firestorm has been played out on the pages of *The New York Review of Books*. The historian Sean Wilentz accused them, in a lacerating review, of distorting history and the actions of Truman, Wallace and others, and “cherry-picking” sources. In response, Stone and Kuznick said Wilentz’s review was “error-riddled”. Wilentz then blasted their “disgraceful” version of history.

Have they made errors? “There are some mistakes but nothing major,” Stone claims. “We could have spent more time attacking Stalin,” concedes Kuznick. “There are no limits to the bad things you could say about Stalin,” Stone growls. “He destroyed the true leftist communist movement in the Twenties and Thirties, for ever. But I went to Russia in the Eighties. They loved Stalin, he was their wartime leader.” Stone praises Stalin’s “coolness” in his dealings with the West. “There are libraries full of books that talk about his brutality,” says Kuznick. “We didn’t feel that was a story we needed to tell.” Stone: “Ask the average American who won World War Two and they’ll say ‘We did’. But the Soviet struggle and sacrifice was far greater.” Kuznick identifies the “mythic understanding of our past” at the root of American exceptionalism: “The cavalry riding in ... that we’re God’s gift to humanity. It’s fanciful and destructive.”

Was America ever the good guy? “In World War Two,” says Stone. Kuznick: “The Marshall Plan was a positive way of us

relating to the world, rebuilding it. If America had reached out to the world we could have helped carve out a different world. We’ve had that opportunity time and time again.” For Stone, the greatest US presidents that never were include Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy (had they not been shot) and George McGovern.

“Something was wrong” in the history Stone imbibed as a child. “Up until the late 1970s I never questioned the Bomb.” While his father, a Republican, hated Truman’s labour policies, “I was born and raised in an age of conformity, we walked around in jackets and ties. I was more scared than rebel, growing up in a climate of fear of bomb tests and Russians taking over our country.” Stone’s analyses, and sometimes audacious revisions of history, are intrinsic to his movies, most controversially in *JFK*, which posited a conspiracy theory around President Kennedy’s assassination.

Platoon was based on his experiences as an infantry soldier in Vietnam, the experience of which was “an eye-opener, but not radically so. I didn’t come back and become an antiwar protester like Ron Kovic [the subject of Stone’s Oscar-winning *Born on the Fourth of July*]. I went between left and right. When I went to El Salvador in 1985 [to research his movie *Salvador*] I saw how the death squads and paramilitaries were linked to the US. I felt the same anger I felt about the confluence of shady ‘contractors’, military and terror we brought to Vietnam. You could tell you were tearing wounds into a country. It was horrible, frightening. But you couldn’t see the whole until you pulled back. In *Platoon*, when you see them shooting at the feet of the Vietnamese in frustration, that’s true. You saw rape and killing. We used semi-automatics ... you’re a monster, you’re as powerful as Hitler when you have that thing in your hand.” Stone (“of course”) thinks there should be greater gun control in the US.

Was he traumatised by Vietnam? “Some people would claim so,” Stone says, smiling. His voice hardens. “No, I was lost. It was as if I didn’t belong. It wasn’t like World War Two, which people spoke about, it was very distressing.” He attended New York University. “I felt like that kid in *Taxi Driver*, that I could kill somebody.” His first wife “helped stabilise me”.

Stone voted for Obama in both elections (this time, “because I didn’t want the other guy to win”) but claims that Obama is “worse than Bush in some ways, he’s reinforced his policies”. The men aren’t excited about a President Hillary Clinton. “She’s too hawkish,” says Kuznick. “She’s into empire,” says Stone. “Nobody wants to talk about getting rid of the f***ing military.” He thinks “economic devastation” could serve some good. “It’s the only way to end an empire. If you don’t have the dough you can’t do all this shit.” But if you don’t have “the dough”, then your infrastructure crumbles, I say. Stone ignores that, and says America doesn’t need “a thousand military bases”. Obama is “a manager of empire, not someone willing to challenge it”. Hollywood doesn’t embrace radicalism,



STONE UNTURNED The film director today; left, in Vietnam in 1968; below, artwork for *The Untold Story*



‘America’s idea that we’re God’s gift to humanity is fanciful and destructive’

he says: “I don’t think a ‘political film’ has ever had bite.” What about the Oscar-laden *Lincoln*, *Zero Dark Thirty* (about the hunt for Osama bin Laden) and *Argo* (about the rescue of US hostages in Iran in 1979)? *Lincoln* was “well-written. The others were conservative, centrist. *Argo* didn’t investigate the reasons for the Iranian unrest. But that wasn’t even as close to offensive as *Zero Dark Thirty*, which didn’t take account of internal opposition within the CIA against the use of torture.” For Stone, it echoed the vigilantism celebrated in American film-making from *Dirty Harry* to the present day. “By the end, she [Jessica Chastain’s character] is a merciless robot who has no qualms about what she’s done. We should have brought bin Laden back to the US and put him on trial. At the Nuremberg Trials they got to give us reasons and important things were aired.”

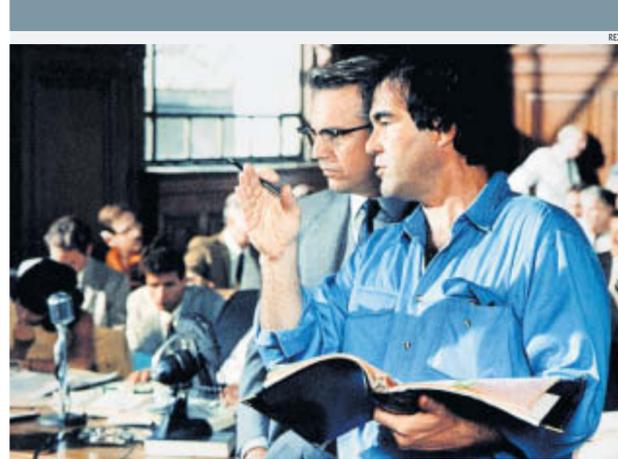
Occupy Wall Street signified “something positive”, says Kuznick, but nothing will substantively change until America becomes “part of the global community”, willing to sign collective treaties and disarm. “A council of nations, like in *Star Wars*,” should preside over space, says Stone. America should be “answerable for what it does rather than be the Darth Vader of the world”.

The death this month of Hugo Chávez,

the President of Venezuela, has robbed the world of “its great consciences”, Stone, a friend, says. “He represented the underclass and poor oppressed everywhere. He was extremely heroic and a great leader.” Stone accepts his book is a “leftist primer, but closer to the truth than people think”. Why does the TV series bear his name? “It was Showtime’s idea,” he says of the production company. “I understand why, otherwise it would disappear.”

“It’s taken years out of my life. This is it man,” mutters Stone. “I’m finished. I’m f***ed. After this, how do you go back to drama? I need a pause.” But not for too long. “I’m writing something, but I’m not going to tell you what.” Of retirement, he says: “I might slow down but I don’t think I’ll retire my mind. It’s always playing chess with itself.” As for our future, this history man is not pessimistic. He hopes that progressive leader will emerge. Time offers up “curveballs, moments things change”, he says smiling. “I wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t able to get out of bed this morning and put some hope into my clothes and toilette.”

The Untold History of the United States by Oliver Stone and Peter Kuznick is published by Ebury at £25. The paperback is out on April 18. The ten-part series begins on Sky Atlantic on April 17 at 9pm



Stone directs Kevin Costner in *JFK*, investigating an assassination conspiracy

Oliver Stone at war

Stone v US foreign policy

Stone set out his stall as a political crusader with *Salvador* (1986), an anti-militarist corrective to *Rambo* and *Top Gun*. Filtered through the exploits of a gonzo journalist (James Woods), Stone exposed America’s aid to the Salvadorian army fighting left-wing guerrillas, casting Uncle Sam as a patron of death squads. “Reagan wants one more notch under his belt before he goes out of office,” Stone said.

Stone v capitalism

Stone’s father was a stockbroker and, during the late 1980s, it seemed natural for the director to fire a broadside at the way American business was being conducted. Making the corporate raider Gordon Gekko the most seductive character in *Wall Street* (“If you need a friend, get a dog”) eclipsed



any moralising. The 2010 sequel took an even more pointed look at capitalism’s woes, with Gekko himself declaring leveraged debt as “the mother of all evil”.

Stone v the Presidents

Stone evidently sees America’s military-industrial complex as awash with dirty secrets. He incurred the wrath of the establishment with his 1991 conspiracy-theorist opus *JFK*. In *Nixon* (1995),



With Michael Douglas, Gordon Gekko in *Wall Street*

Tricky Dicky growled:

“The President can bomb anybody he likes.” But the most contentious thing about *W* (2008) was how easy he was on George W. Bush, a presidency of which he’s said: “We have a fascist security state running this country ... If I were Bush, I’d shoot myself. Existentially, there’s no hope. His soul is dead.”

Stone v the media

Mad, bad and — given its alleged links to copycat murders — dangerous to anyone who watched, *Natural Born Killers* (1995) saw Stone become a kind of Swift on acid. His lurid satire attacked the way the entertainment industry turned criminals into celebrities, and our willingness to lap it up. “I just reflect what I see around me,” Stone reasoned. He had his cake and ate it, pimping up the film’s ultraviolence in stylised fashion.

Stone v the war on drugs

In Stone’s screenplay for *Scarface* (1983) America’s drugs policy was useless in preventing the rise of a cocaine kingpin (Al Pacino), but it was last year’s *Savages* — a thriller about a Mexican drug cartel taking over a boutique California marijuana business — that gave Stone, who enjoys his weed, a launchpad to espouse his view of the war on drugs. “It’s grown into close to a \$25 to \$30 billion DEA bureaucracy, as well as overcrowding the prisons with victims.” James Jackson

Six of the best

From Shakespeare to Caryl Churchill — Lindsay Posner on the best political plays thetimes.co.uk/sixbest



‘A fascinating game of deconstruction’ *Le Monde*

Schaubühne Berlin presents **Fräulein Julie**

directed by **Katie Mitchell** and **Leo Warner**

Listening, watching... Strindberg’s class tragedy observed from below stairs

barbican

30 Apr–4 May barbican.org.uk