

Stoning Dubya

Review of Oliver Stone's Movie "W"

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I spent the past couple of days hanging out with Vincent Bugliosi who wants Bush killed for his crimes, following a fair trial of course, and who openly pushes the supposed need for retribution while disclaiming much interest in deterrence or restoration. Then I watched Oliver Stone's new movie, "W," which depicts Bush as a poor, sad fool who's just been trying his hardest to please his daddy all these years. If I have to choose, I'm on Stone's side.

I think Bush has been far more sadistic and cynical than Stone's depiction, but I think Stone's work opposes the spread of sadism and cynicism in his audience, while Bugliosi plays to and encourages both. At the same time, I think Bugliosi is doing more good for the world than Stone, because Stone is simply making movies, while Bugliosi is attempting to prosecute Bush for his crimes. The need to prosecute Bush, to my mind, has nothing to do with whether or not I like the man. He needs to be punished in order to deter future presidents from committing similar abuses. Is that too abstract a motivation to build a popular movement around? Is it necessary to play on people's hatred for Bush in order to achieve deterrent justice? I'm not so sure: I watched Bugliosi win standing ovations the other night but face cold silence and only a handful of nodding heads when he advocated retribution.

Now, don't get me wrong, Stone does not make Bush look good. He makes his presidency look like a catastrophe. When you see Stone on Charlie Rose and other television shows pretending he didn't make an anti-Bush movie, Stone is apparently lying, presumably in the belief that it will sell more tickets. He made an anti-Bush movie as he was morally obliged to do, and he made a good one. But it has flaws. It's a simpler story than the real one, because of its time limitation and its focus on its main character. We are left believing that the entire motivation to run for president came from Bush with maybe just the slightest nudge from Karl Rove, and that the whole idea to attack Iraq was Bush's. There's a good scene in which Cheney lays out his plan for conquering the whole Middle East, but the Project for a New American Century makes no appearance in the film. The Iraq War is supposed to have sprung full grown from the feeble brain of an infantile son still angry about his father's reelection defeat.

And yet, Stone would have us believe that Bush actually believed in the existence of the "weapons of mass destruction" in Iraq and was never aware of lying about them, and that his top staff believed their own lies and concluded after the invasion that Saddam Hussein had pretended to have weapons. This is absurd, given Hussein's pre-war declarations of the exact truth about the weapons: that he did not have any, and given what we know about Bush — some of which many people will learn for the first time from this film. For example,

Bush's suggestion to Tony Blair that they could fly a US plane falsely painted in UN colors over Iraq to try to get it shot at and create an excuse for war was made in the White House on January 31, 2003. In this film it's made in Crawford, Texas, but at least it's made. We also see the planning for the invasion, from which Bush and his advisors expect very few casualties. None of this makes sense while clinging to the idea that Bush actually believed his own lies about the weapons. Of course, Bush could have believed in some of the weapons while lying about others, and while lying about Iraq being an imminent threat to the United States. He could have believed that somehow merely possessing weapons constituted a justification for war. But the evidence in reality and in the movie is strong that he did not believe his own weapons lies. He expected few casualties. He wanted to provoke an attack. And he said after the invasion that it didn't make any difference whether there were weapons or not. Of course we also know of widespread efforts in the Bush administration to distort and even forge evidence to support a war.

Stone's movie is even less accurate in its depiction of George Bush, Sr., painting him as wise, decent, good, and full of integrity. This is a man who ran all sorts of murderous operations out of the CIA, who cut a deal with Iran to get Reagan elected, who took part in the Iran-Contra crimes, who blatantly lied us into the first Gulf War, etc. Stone could have made him look sane by comparison with his son without cleaning him up beyond recognition.

At the theater where I watched "W," they showed a preview first of another movie: "Frost / Nixon" (<http://www.frostnixon.net>), which is about an attempt to hold Richard Nixon accountable for his crimes through the court of public opinion. That was decidedly not sufficient. The result of not holding him, or Reagan and Bush Sr., accountable in real courts was Dubya. The result of not holding Dubya accountable in a real court would be far worse. And we have a crazier, stupider, meaner candidate than Bush running right now for the position of vice president on a ticket with an old man in bad health.

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