

Oliver Stone's The Untold History of the United States looks for the truth

by [Adrian Mack](#) on Jun 11, 2014 at 2:00 pm



A remarkable thing happened after the release of Oliver Stone's *JFK* in 1991. "The JFK Records Act was passed [the following year] as a result of the brouhaha around the film," Stone himself says, talking to the *Georgia Straight* from Los Angeles. "The congressmen were trying to prove that no conspiracy had happened, that the Warren Commission had been on the up-and-up. And it wasn't on the up-and-up."

Some five million documents were released because of Stone's movie, bequeathing an entirely new body of research that vindicates both the film and the Jim Garrison investigation it depicted. "It seems that every loophole we pointed out has gotten wider," he says. In spite of this, the film, which was viciously pilloried by the likes of the *New York Times* before it was even released, is still being blasted. As recently as January, the online magazine *Slate.com* launched a hysterical broadside, saying that *JFK* "destroyed your faith in the American political system". The article ended with a snarky "Thanks, Oliver Stone."

"Well, there's been plenty of that," Stone says with a hint of a sigh. "There were several hundred attacks." Indeed, after some 35 years of incendiary filmmaking, the man who gave us such era-defining works as *Platoon*, *Wall Street*, and *Natural Born Killers* is still tweaking public discourse and jabbing at the powers that be—and he's still being attacked for it. Meaning, per *JFK*, that he must be doing something right.

In his recent 10-part documentary series *The Untold History of the United States*—which will

be screened in its entirety (along with two additional prologue episodes) at the Fifth Avenue Cinemas (June 15 to 20) after Stone comes to town for this year's Vancouver Biennale—the filmmaker teams with American University historian Peter J. Kuznick to take a breakneck look at the deeper and less well-publicized politics of the American century.

“The problem, and we go into it in some detail in *The Untold History of the United States*, is that it *has* become corrupt,” Stone says. “Since 1898 to 2013, we trace the pattern of development where imperialism and militarism predominate. And every one of the branches of our government and our democracy have to some degree become corrupted by it.”

Referring to Dwight D. Eisenhower's famed 1961 farewell address in which the departing U.S. president (“and he is not a hero in this story,” the director notes) warned against the metastasizing military-industrial complex, Stone continues: “It's only gotten worse because the money has gotten much bigger. So now we're in an impossible situation where we find ourselves driven into wars, driven into a hundred and some thirty countries where we have military alliances, military bases—we can't seem to get out of it. I'm not sure that any one single man, one president, can do anything about it.”

As Stone points out, the crux of the story lies in the Second World War. In the very first episode (not including two pre-WWII prologues), *Untold History* punctures the myth of America's swashbuckling late arrival on the scene. In Stone and Kuznick's telling, it's the Soviet Union that provides the primary narrative of the “Good War”.

“We went back to the heart of it,” he says. “We went back to the heart of the World War II story, what happened in World War II and what happened in those months after World War II; that is very important. We went to ground zero. We dropped the atomic bomb. You have to reexamine that. Americans forget that; they easily gloss over it... Look at what America was doing from 1943 to '45. There's your answer. That's the America that we've become. It's all there, and you have to go to ground zero to find out.”

By the time we get to Chapter 10, *Untold History* has demystified decades of consensus thinking about everything from the Cold War right up to the “Age of Terror”. “People forget this stuff because they move on to the next incident and the next incident. Then we're into the Iraq war; we now readily admit it was a fabrication like Gulf of Tonkin was. They snowball, but so many things get forgotten,” he says. “It's maddening.” It's also fertile ground for an artist who grudgingly accepts the *Straight's* suggested title of “counterhistorian”. He adds, “Well, you could call it that, yeah. Peter Kuznick is a historian; I'm a dramatist.”

Perhaps Stone is best described as a provocateur for the truth. His presence here inaugurates the biennale's new CineFest LIVE program, which focuses on cinema's potential for community engagement and social action. He'll be holding a master class for emerging filmmakers at SFU Woodward's on Saturday (June 14) afternoon, which includes a screening of his student short “Last Year in Vietnam”. (“It's a crude film but it's heartfelt,” he remarks.) That evening, Stone will present an episode of *Untold History* (“Bush II & Obama: The Age of Terror”) at the Vogue Theatre, followed by a Q & A.

Presumably, there will be a few questions about his newly announced project: a feature film about National Security Agency whistle blower Edward Snowden. Because we live in an era when a Hollywood movie is infinitely less likely to prompt an act of Congress, can we hope that Stone's next film really *will* destroy our faith in the American political system?

“Oh, I think the problem would be that the faith of the American people would be destroyed by

the government themselves and their bad behaviour,” he answers with a chuckle. “You knew something was going on way before Ed Snowden released his documents, but what he gave us was incontrovertible proof of what the government was doing. We know from COINTELPRO, we know from Hoover, we know from Nixon, we know that throughout the years the United States has broken the law.”

That's real history. Give 'em hell, Ollie.

More info is at www.vancouverbiennale.com.

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