

Oliver Stone's *Untold History of the United States*

By Christine Schofelt
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Oliver Stone's Untold History of the United States, directed by Stone, and co-written by the veteran filmmaker and Peter Kuznick, is a 10-part documentary series that premiered on cable network Showtime in November 2012. Its stated aim is to shed light on little known or deliberately obscured aspects of American history in the twentieth century, treating such events as the US atomic bombing of Japanese cities, Henry Wallace's campaign for president in 1948, the Cold War, the Vietnam War and other historic episodes.

While many viewers may be introduced to events and people with whom they were unfamiliar and even to a radical critique of certain aspects of US imperialist policy, the series ultimately does little to enlighten the viewer as to the underlying driving forces of history.

This is in large part due to Stone and Kuznick's propensity to attribute the conduct of those under examination to issues of personal character, as well as their reliance on the "great man" theory, which holds that the actions of charismatic or influential individuals are the deciding factors of history.

Stone (born 1946) has produced a highly uneven (one might even say, *fatally* uneven) oeuvre—ranging from the anti-militarist *Platoon* (1986) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), as well as *Wall Street* (1987), with its (albeit ham-fisted) condemnation of financiers and their excesses, through such ridiculously violent fare as *Natural Born Killers* (1994) and shrill, unconvincing works such as *Any Given Sunday* (1999).

More recently, the filmmaker has tried his hand—and failed badly—at a drama about 9/11 (*World Trade Center*, 2006), a biography of George W. Bush (*W*, 2008) and a reprise of his look at the financial industry (*Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*, 2010). All in all, far more confused minuses than compelling pluses.

Peter Kuznick is professor of history at American University in Washington, D.C., with a focus on modern American history, radical history and American sexuality. A long-time activist, he spearheaded the campaign against the Smithsonian Institution's sanitized 1994 Enola Gay exhibit, dealing with the atomic bombing of Japan. He teaches a history course using Stone's films.

The two have co-written numerous op-ed and blog pieces on the subject of the importance of historical knowledge. They assert that *Untold History* and its accompanying book are intended to offer a more complete, truthful view of American history than that given by textbooks now available to students. While they rightly call for a deeper study of history, they do not provide one in their series.

A few constant and superficial themes run through the Stone-Kuznick series, which might be subtitled, "If only..." A basic premise is that if only certain individuals had been in place in the US government at key moments, all of modern American history might have turned out for the better.

One of the examples Stone and Kuznick advance involves liberal New Dealer Henry Wallace, vice president in Franklin Roosevelt's third term in office (1941-1945) and the Progressive Party's candidate for president

in 1948, a candidacy supported by the Communist Party. If only, Stone and Kuznick argue, Wallace had been named as Roosevelt's running mate in 1944, instead of Harry Truman, things would have gone in a very different direction.

Individuals do play a role in history, of course, and events might have proceeded at slightly different tempo or with a slightly different coloring under Wallace, but the filmmakers are playing fast and loose here with the facts of history and social processes.

First, there is the objective fact that Wallace *was replaced* by Democratic Party leaders for definite reasons, including his vaguely pro-Stalinist views. In any event, the postwar trajectory of American imperialism was not determined, in the end, by its personnel, but by the stage of global capitalist development, as well as the internal dynamics of American social life.

The series' overall outlook is a vulgar and sloppy petty bourgeois radicalism, which tends to replace emotion and indignant declamation for rational argument and an orientation to the historic role of the working class.

Stone and Kuznick repeatedly condemn the "lack of compassion" or "arrogance" shown by this or that US president and other figures. In discussing the Vietnam War, for example, Stone intones that "from what the ancient Greeks called 'hubris,' or arrogance, comes the fall. And from this initially obscure war came a great distortion of economic, social and moral life in America."

It turns out that the widely celebrated so-called greatest generation, the generation that matured during the Depression and went to fight in World War II, has a lot to answer for. Criticizing the platitudes about this generation—like those spouted by former NBC news anchor Tom Brokaw—is important and worthy, but this is not done well in *Untold History*. To tout (or fault) one generation beyond all others without examining the historical circumstances faced by the generation in question is a counterproductive undertaking.

Kuznick and Stone swallow the idea of the "greatest generation," only in reverse (the "worst generation"?). It is an unproductive contrarian position to take, and an opportunity to examine the cynical use made of the sacrifices by this generation has been missed. This is unfortunate, because the "greatest generation" has been invoked as a propaganda tool for years up to and including Brokaw's March 2003 declaration that those about to invade Iraq represented a "new band of brothers."

The *Untold History*'s argument that if only John F. Kennedy had survived, his administration would have avoided a full-scale war in Vietnam is extremely dubious. Not only did the escalation of the conflict begin before his death, documents that have been declassified since Kennedy's assassination suggest a different story. The notion is asserted as a would-have-been fact—here again history turns on the actions of one person.

We are told that the number of US dead in the war, 60,000, was small—with a vague insinuation that they were even deserved—compared to

the Vietnamese death toll. No doubt this is true, but that does not make the American dead any less victims of imperialism. A similar approach is taken in the segment devoted to World War II, where the number of Soviet dead is presented *versus* the total of casualties suffered by the Europeans and Americans.

The massive Soviet suffering is significant and not well enough known, but it could be presented in a manner that shows the overall scale of the war's destruction. The filmmakers, rather than pointing to the devastation as an argument against the imperialist slaughter, essentially pit the various populations against one another, on the basis of which one suffered more. A hostility to the mass of the people finds expression in this sort of cheap radicalism, reminiscent of the anti-Americanism that is the "anti-imperialism" of fools.

Stone has never been one for nuance, and this extends to his view of history. There are some glaring contradictions, wild assertions and omissions in this "untold history" that need to be considered. Ronald Reagan is at one point described as "perhaps too kindly" to be held responsible for the Iran-Contra dealings, and Stone's declaration that Reagan "left behind a trail of bloody death and destruction—but also came excruciatingly close to enduring greatness" is deeply misguided and reactionary.

In the episode covering the Reagan years, the conditions of the working class are once again left out of the script, as the firing of the air traffic controllers, members of PATCO—a watershed event, with repercussions we are feeling to this day—is accorded barely a sentence. Nothing is said about the betrayal of the striking PATCO workers by the AFL-CIO.

How, in Stone and Kuznick's eyes, did Reagan come close to greatness? He almost signed a treaty with Soviet Stalinist leader Mikhail Gorbachev in Reykjavik, Iceland, in 1986 to ban all nuclear weapons. The failure is set down to Reagan's vain attachment to the Strategic Defense Initiative. Presumably his signature on this treaty would have counterbalanced Grenada, Nicaragua, Afghanistan and any number of other bloody crimes.

Untold History presents Gorbachev as a progressive figure, a man of peace. There is no examination of the highly degenerated conditions of the Soviet Union by that point, and the filmmakers simply leave out of the picture the Stalinist leader's role in the restoration of capitalism in the USSR. On the contrary, such an "opening up" of Russia is presented as a positive development.

Stone and Kuznick co-wrote a 2011 piece for the *New Statesman*, "Don't betray us, Barack—end the empire," in which they argued that Barack Obama should heed the example provided by Gorbachev: "He [Obama] would be wise to do so, because the older man [Gorbachev] oversaw the dismantling of the USSR in a smoother and more peaceful way than anyone believed possible, and so knows something about bringing the curtain down on a dysfunctional empire that has long overstayed its welcome."

The return to capitalism was anything but "smooth" and "peaceful." The process has been a disaster for the Russian population, leading to declines in life expectancy, widespread social misery and the unchecked domination of the Russian state by outright criminals.

It is relevant to mention that Gorbachev himself wrote a glowing blurb for the book that accompanies the series. He is clearly a leader after Stone's own heart, someone who talks a humane game, but acts firmly in the interests of the wealthy global elite.

In keeping with their middle-class outlook, the filmmakers take the opportunity to blame the population for the all-out attacks on democratic rights during the Bush and Obama years. Stone, for instance, says that in regard to the tracking down of Osama bin Laden, "America's self-love was again in full flower, there was no discussion of bringing a wounded bin Laden back for imprisonment or trial...a trial was the last thing most Americans wanted—those who would accept torture could tolerate

vigilante justice."

It is telling, in light of the litany of crimes committed by the Obama administration enumerated in this series—extrajudicial execution, pre-emptive attacks on civilians, the prosecution of whistle-blowers, etc.—that Stone (along with the rest of the liberal left in America) voted for Barack Obama in both 2008 and 2012, the latter election taking place even as the documentary was being assembled.

Some of Stone's artistic choices in this series are questionable, and serve to detract from important material. For example, the use of actors employing thick and obviously false accents to portray various Soviet leaders (particularly Premier Nikita Khrushchev) was not a wise decision, as the lines are often rendered either incomprehensible or cartoonish.

As well, Stone and Kuznick seem to have gone out of their way in places to choose the most obscenity-laden quotes available to illustrate (or not) their points. There is copious footage of war dead—one could almost say gratuitous—the repetitiveness of which serves more to desensitize than to shock or show the scale of the crimes involved.

The series ends with a confused, meandering 10-minute monologue by Stone: "We must ask ourselves; in looking back on the US century, have we acted wisely and humanely in our relations to the rest of the world?... We must look in the mirror. Have we perhaps in our self-love become the angels of our own despair?" Later, Stone pays tribute to identity politics: "A young woman said to me in the 1970s, 'we need to feminize this planet.' I thought it strange then. But now I realize there's power in love. Real power in real love."

He concludes inanely, "There is a way forward. By remembering the past, and then we can start, step by step, like a baby, reaching for the stars."

In this series, Stone and Kuznick do not offer a coherent account of the twentieth century; their political views and orientation preclude such a possibility. They offer bits and pieces, some of it valuable, much of it skewed or worse, which bolsters their fondness for great men as the motor force of progress.

In the end, the way forward they offer is one of a return to "respect [for] the law—not of the jungle, but the law of civilization by which we first came together and put aside our differences to preserve the things that matter." In other words, a way backward into a utopia that never existed.

The study of history is important. This study, however, must be thorough and serious, and with an eye to the forces involved in shaping that history—the analysis drawn must be uncompromising and show a clear way forward. Vague platitudes and self-serving "radical" tidbits will not do.

The author recommends:

Oliver Stone's *Savages and the war on drugs*
[30 July 2012]

W: A crude approach is not good for grasping much of anything
[22 October 2008]

Hysteria never helped anyone
[12 February 2000]

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