

DE  
He's been hailed  
as a genius, a  
provocateur and  
something of  
a taskmaster —  
and that's just by  
his friends. We  
go in search of the  
real Oliver Stone...

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STONE

WORDS OWEN WILLIAMS  
PORTRAIT MARK MANN



AUGUST

# IT OFTEN FEELS, FOUR DECADES INTO HIS HOLLYWOOD CAREER, THAT OLIVER STONE WAS BORN CONTROVERSIAL.

The director of *Platoon*, *JFK* and now the forthcoming *Snowden* is a startling series of contradictions: a philosopher willing to throw himself into physical conflict; a loyal friend who pushes his cast to breaking point; a commercially successful filmmaker who ignores studio rules. We talked to his friends and collaborators — *Wall Street* and *W* screenwriter Stanley Weiser, *Platoon* star John C McGinley, *Talk Radio* playwright/star Eric Bogosian, *W* star Josh Brolin and *Salvador* star Tony Plana — to try to unravel the puzzle...

## THE SOLDIER

Oliver Stone went to Vietnam to die. The 21-year-old, boarding school-educated stockbroker's son was, in his own words, a "complicated" youth who'd already written an unpublished, 1,400-page autobiographical novel and dropped out of Yale to teach English in Saigon. Directionless, he fixed on war as "the most difficult thing a young man could go through". He joined the US military and specifically requested combat duty, in April 1967, and was in the thick of it by September, not expecting to return. His 18-month tour saw him decorated for "extraordinary acts of courage under fire" and would inform his work and politics for the rest of his life.

Post-Vietnam, Stone enrolled on NYU's film course, where he met Stanley Weiser, who would go on to write *Wall Street* with him and later *W*. "He was certainly brilliant," Weiser tells us. "He was an *enfant terrible*; provocateur; brooding loner; visionary. He was older than the rest of us, and embittered because he'd been to Vietnam, whereas all the rest of us had the privilege of not going to war. He was certainly scarred by Vietnam and he didn't

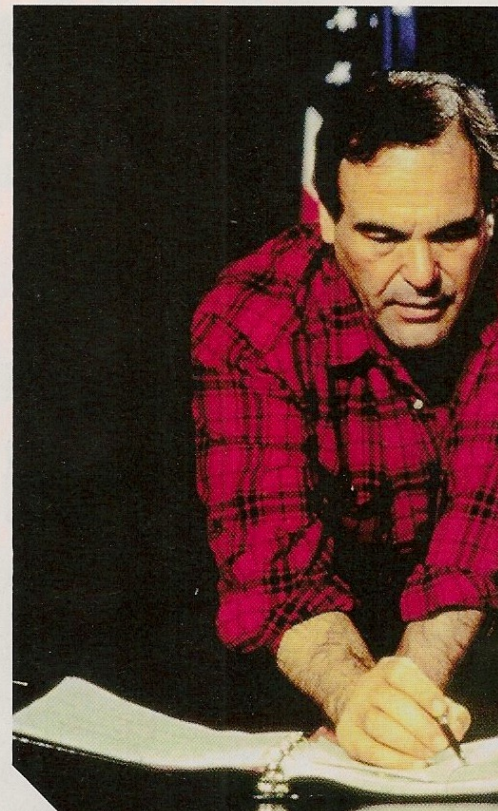


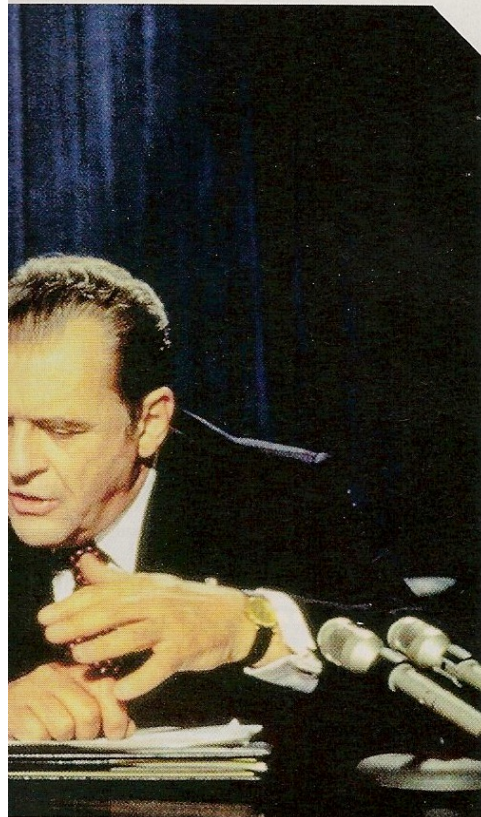
**Above:** *Nixon*, 1995: Stone runs through the script with lead Anthony Hopkins. **Left:** Eric Bogosian and Leslie Hope in 1998's *Talk Radio*. **Here:** Taking a trip down memory lane while on the set of *Platoon*, 1986.

talk about it. He was very private. To this day I really don't know much about his wartime experiences."

Those experiences would, however, feed directly into Stone's Vietnam trilogy: *Platoon*, presenting a grunt's eye view of the ground war; *Born On The Fourth Of July*, detailing the combat and post-war experiences of disabled veteran Ron Kovic; and *Heaven & Earth*, which attempted to present the war and its aftermath from a female, Vietnamese perspective. Tantalising glimpses of Stone's personal experiences can be inferred from all three, and from the film commentaries he recorded, where he talks about his younger self with incredulity, as if he's describing somebody else.

"I became aware of my character in *Platoon*, Sergeant O'Neill, being an amalgamation of a couple of people Oliver had known in Vietnam," recalls John C McGinley. "I thought of O'Neill like those pilot fish that suck off the kills of sharks, feeding off any character that can further him." McGinley created a backstory

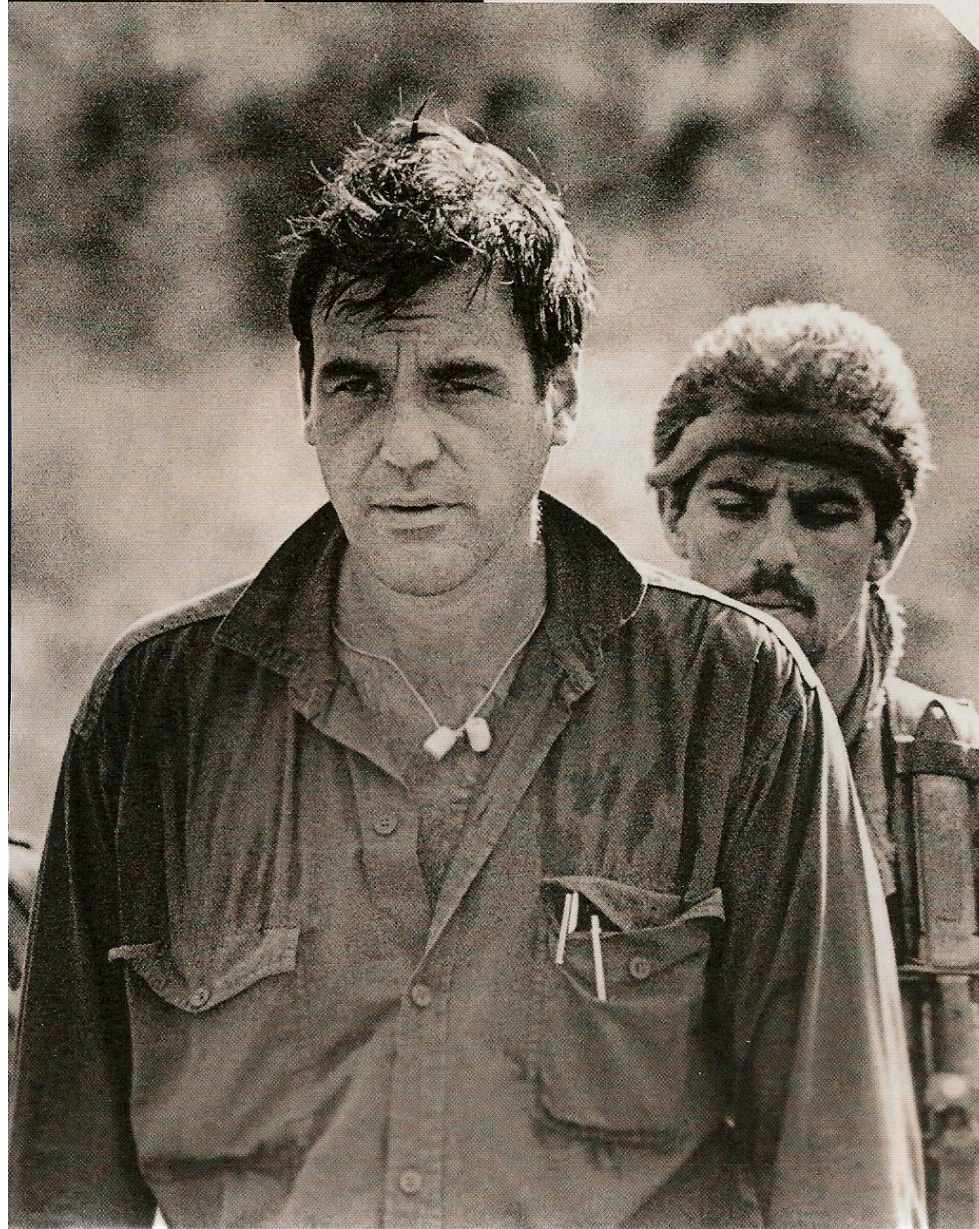




for him, one that saw him in Southeast Asia, because “he was a REMF — Rear-Echelon Mother-Fucker” (an officer who stays behind the lines far from danger) who had been transferred by his superior after cheating at a card game. “Oliver loved that,” he remembers. “For the two weeks before the shoot, when he put us through the boot camp, this stuff was all we talked about.”

## THE JOKER

Stone’s indelible, life-changing experience in Vietnam led to deadly serious drama, but he also isn’t averse to finding humour in it. *Talk Radio*’s co-writer and star Eric Bogosian remembers the director prepping *Born On The Fourth Of July* at the same time that *Talk Radio* was shooting (the driven younger Stone made seven films in seven years, from *Salvador* to *JFK*). “The day we did the scene at the baseball stadium he was running make-up tests on Tom Cruise,” Bogosian recounts to *Empire*.



“They wheeled Tom Cruise into my dressing room in a wheelchair and told me he was a Vietnam vet that wanted to meet me. I go, ‘Hi, how are you doing?’ and then everyone starts laughing and Cruise stands up and it’s oh-so hilarious...”

Josh Brolin confirms: “He can be very tortured and deadly serious, but then he can turn around and be this giddy kid. I love seeing him giggle. There’s nothing better.”

## THE INVESTIGATOR

*JFK*, *Nixon* and *The Doors* all play out in much the same era, while *Salvador* deals with the Salvadoran death squads and Civil War of 1979 and 1980. More recently he’s made documentaries about Fidel Castro and the successive left-wing governments of Latin America. He goes so far as to make a distinction between “films” and “movies”: the former serious and the latter comparatively frivolous. *U-Turn* and *Savages* both carry the credit “A movie by Oliver Stone”.

Tony Plana, who played *Salvador*’s death squad leader Major Maximiliano Casanova (based on the real-life Roberto D’Aubuisson), remembers being immediately impressed by Stone’s “underlying push for the truth”. “I did a lot of research for *Salvador* on my own,” he tells *Empire*, “but Oliver inspired that in me. While it was obviously going to be subjective, he also wanted *Salvador* to feel real and tangible, which imbues you with a great responsibility. You couldn’t help but be sucked into this vortex of passion, driven by historical forces and Oliver’s compelling need to expose the truth of a historical reality and bring it to life.”

Lately Stone’s narrative features have delved into contemporary events (the ancient history of *Alexander* remains an anomaly). *World Trade Center* was released just five years on from 9/11, while his biographical satire *W* dealt with the George W Bush Presidency before its dying days had even played out. His film about Edward Snowden, with Joseph Gordon-Levitt as the NSA whistleblower, is imminent.

The time frames may be more modern, but an interrogation of American history forms much of Stone’s directional will. “My major impression of him was insatiable curiosity about why people do what they do,” says Josh Brolin (*W*’s Dubya). “He’s constantly trying to get deeper into the human condition, this unmasterable thing. Yes he’s intense, yes he’s left wing, yes he’s a conspiracy theorist. But it’s less that he’s on this great moral high horse and more that he’s just constantly questioning. There isn’t an answer, necessarily. It’s more of a constant search.”

Weiser says that, even after four decades, he remains amazed at the lengths Stone will go to immerse himself in a subject. “It’s

journalism in a sense," he says. "When you work with him he makes you duck into every corner of your subject. When Stone was writing *Scarface* [a screenplay-only gig, directed by Brian De Palma] he mingled among the mobsters in Cuba. For a time we were working on a movie about the Civil Rights Movement, and he told me I should go down and live in Mississippi for a while and just hang around and meet killers and live in a motel and travel around. He just expects people to do outlandish things like he does himself."

## THE GENERAL

Stone's commitment to his vision extends well beyond the writing and is evident in his refusal to compromise. The NFL distanced itself from the American Football epic *Any Given Sunday* when Stone rejected their suggested changes to his portrayal of drug use within the sport. When it proved impossible to fund *W* in the US, its budget had to be scraped together from China and Europe. "Oliver's never like, 'Oh, we have to take this one 'fuck' out for the PG-13, or we have to cast this hot chick to get the young audience,'" says Brolin. "I mean, he'll do that for himself, but he won't do it for the audience or the studio."

Unsurprisingly, Stone expects the same level of integrity and commitment from his actors. "*Platoon* was deeply personal to Oliver," says McGinley. "It's almost impossible to get films made anyway, so for him to have gotten *Platoon* going when he did, when nobody would do Vietnam movies, was extraordinary. For him *not* to have ridden it pretty rough would have been tantamount to insanity. He had to get this thing done, and he had to marshal all these men in a single direction and still realise his vision, which he did." Charlie Sheen's character at one point refers to Sergeant Barnes (Tom Berenger) as Captain Ahab, and it's tempting to draw a parallel. McGinley won't quite take it that far. "I didn't see Oliver as Ahab, so much as just a really driven storyteller and a visualist par excellence. The really brutal cocktail was Oliver and Dale [Dye, 'Nam vet and technical advisor] served in the same drink. That's volatile stuff!"

Plana and McGinley both describe incredibly difficult productions: *Platoon* shot in the Philippines with the constant threat of a coup against President Cory Aquino and the attendant anarchy in the background. Plana similarly describes *Salvador* as a chaotic process where the day-to-day experience "reflected the reality that we were trying to capture". James Woods, starring in the film as journalist Richard Boyle, was understandably reluctant to travel to the set following the murder by guerilla fighters of Stone's military advisor, Ricardo Cienfuegos. Stone called Woods a pussy (but the shoot was moved from El Salvador to

the safer Mexico).

"Those are both very strong egos and they were always challenging one another; it was fascinating to watch," Plana says of the Stone-Woods relationship. "Jim Belushi [playing photographer Doctor Rock, the Doctor Gonzo to Woods' Hunter S Thompson] was in the middle of it all, like the Fool in *King Lear*, making fun of it all with this wonderful, mordant sense of humour."

Bogosian had a comparatively easy ride in the safety of *Talk Radio*'s studio setting, but still describes Stone in military terms as "the general" of his troops. "He had a very intense focus, and he didn't always know how he was going to get where he wanted to go, but he knew when he wasn't there yet. He would keep trying to figure out how to play the scene, how to make it look right, the rhythmic thing. Whatever the problem was, he would keep chewing at it."

## THE TASKMASTER

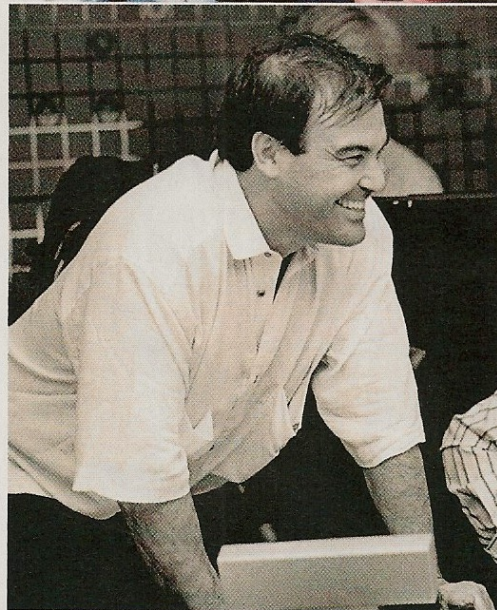
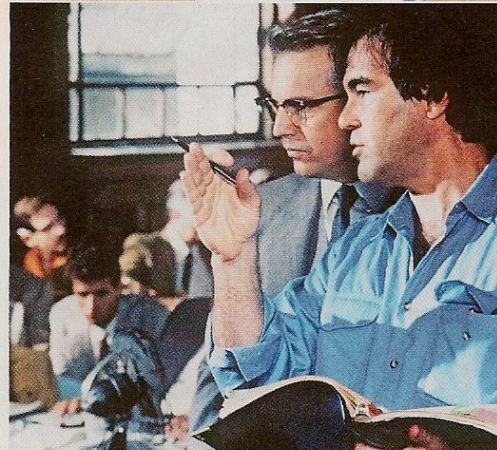
Achieving Stone's standards can be a punishing process for anyone in his immediate orbit. "You can't get comfortable," laughs Weiser. "If he's just praised you, you know a beating is coming. But it works the other way around, too: he's good cop and bad cop at the same time. He forces you, he provokes you, he insults you, he goads you, and he knows your maximum area of vulnerability. He hones in on that and it's really bedevilling."

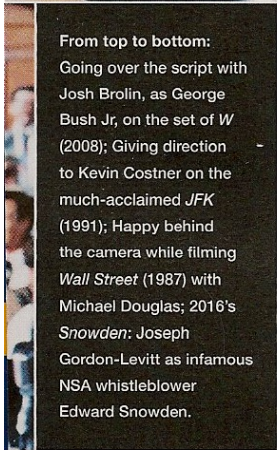
On the set of *Wall Street* Stone flatly told Michael Douglas that he'd been watching the rushes and Douglas looked like he'd never acted a day in his life. Bogosian tells a similar story about being informed that the *Talk Radio* dailies were terrible and that the film was going to fail catastrophically unless Bogosian raised his game.

"He said to one guy, 'You were so good in the audition. What happened?'" Bogosian continues. "He said to someone else, 'You're wallpaper. Every time you come into a scene you disappear.' Of course, people would be crushed. I asked him years later if it was a psychological thing he was doing. He said, 'No, I meant it.'"

However, it's difficult to entirely trust that assertion. "He came up to me during *W*," recalls Brolin with a grin, "and he goes — you know, with that squint he has — 'Hey man, do you have something medical going on with you? What's up? Are you feeling okay today?'" And I immediately said, 'Don't do that. I know what you're doing right now, and I don't like it.' And he smiles and he goes, 'Aw man, you're fucking tough!' And he never did it again. [Laughs] It was that thing of trying to keep people off camber in order to keep them raw."

Plana recalls a similar tactic on *Salvador*: "He called me a pussy a couple of times. He





From top to bottom: Going over the script with Josh Brolin, as George Bush Jr, on the set of *W* (2008); Giving direction to Kevin Costner on the much-acclaimed *JFK* (1991); Happy behind the camera while filming *Wall Street* (1987) with Michael Douglas; 2016's *Snowden*: Joseph Gordon-Levitt as infamous NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden.



was trying to get my goat to make me angrier, saying stupid shit to get a reaction and intensify my emotional reality. You tend to channel that reaction back into what you're doing."

Plana turned down a role in *Platoon* to make *Three Amigos!* instead, choosing a five-star hotel in Tucson, Arizona over what he knew would be a gruelling few months amid ticks and poisonous centipedes in the Philippine jungle. Stone didn't speak to him for years, until he needed a reliable Cuban actor for *JFK*'s Carlos Bringuier (Plana would subsequently also appear in *Nixon* as Manolo Sanchez). Even then he made Plana audition, and wasn't in the room when he did so, leaving it to his casting director. "But I was glad to get back in his good graces eventually," Plana smiles.

This is typical of the way collaborators explain Stone's behaviour, one of many who are confident that his methods not only provoke but inspire their best work. Insists Weiser: "Ultimately he's like a really good tennis partner. He forces you to play up to his level, to do a better job than you'd do for a lesser director."

## THE ONE-OFF

Whatever they suffered during shooting, Stone is held in real respect and affection by his collaborators. Bogosian says drily that he and Stone didn't stay in touch after *Talk Radio*, and were never really what he'd call friends. "But we created something together I'm very proud of. That sort of bond with another person is indelible. Oliver put a stamp of approval on me early in my career, with all the weight of his tremendous notoriety and power. He set me up so that people looked at me differently, so I'm forever beholden to him for that."

Brolin reaches for his phone to pull up a text message he says is "classic Oliver". The director had popped into the actor's mind recently, and Brolin wrote to him: "Just been hit with a hammer of your visage and I miss you greatly. Hope we have a chance to catch up soon. Much love." Stone's response: "Why 'hammer' and 'hit' verbiage? You always typecast me in warlike terms."

"That's him," Brolin laughs. "You can't fucking say anything. But I love that. I appreciate the language, first of all. And that he saw an opportunity not to be linear. Some people do it and it's a major affectation: you can feel how hard they're working at it. For him, it's what comes first. He actually has to work at going, 'Oh, wait, perhaps I'll just answer: Nice to hear from you, I've been thinking about you too.' That's not his default. His default is skewed." 🍷

**SNOWDEN IS IN CINEMAS LATER THIS YEAR AND WILL BE REVIEWED IN A FUTURE ISSUE**

## WRITTEN IN STONE?

How much do Stone's screenwriting-only jobs reflect his preoccupations?



### SCARFACE (1983)

**Directed by:** Brian De Palma  
Loose remake of the 1932 Howard Hawks gangster film.

**Stone scale:** ★★★★★

Marks for international drug crime, US/South American relations, legal and political skullduggery, ethnic stereotypes.

### MIDNIGHT EXPRESS (1978)

**Directed by:** Alan Parker  
Adaptation of Billy Hayes and William Hoffer's book exposing life in a Turkish jail.

**Stone Scale:** ★★★★★

Marks for international drug crime, US international relations, legal and political skullduggery and ethnic stereotypes.

### YEAR OF THE DRAGON (1985)

**Directed by:** Michael Cimino  
Adaptation of Robert Daley's novel about organised crime in New York.

**Stone Scale:** ★★★★★

Marks for international drug crime, 'Nam-vet protagonist and ethnic stereotypes.

### EVITA (1996)

**Directed by:** Alan Parker  
Adaptation of Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical about Argentinian first lady Eva Peron.

**Stone Scale:** ★★★★★

Marks for South American politics, revolution and chaos of war, but some deducted for singing, Madonna and Jimmy Nail.

### CONAN THE BARBARIAN (1982)

**Directed by:** John Milius  
Very loose adaptation of Robert E Howard's fantasy stories.

**Stone Scale:** ★★★★★

Marks for totalitarian regime, Nietzschean quest for knowledge, revolution and bad wigs, but deducted for wizard that turns into giant snake, and Arnie eating a culture while crucified.

### EIGHT MILLION WAYS TO DIE (1986)

**Directed by:** Hal Ashby  
Adaptation of Lawrence Sanders' detective novels about private investigator Matthew Scudder.

**Stone Scale:** ★★★★★

One mark. About drug crime, but it's a generic noir.