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Corporations

Introduction

You never really know what goes on behind the scenes in corporations, but it was an abrupt cancellation with two, three weeks to go. The decision was made in hours, when I was out of the country. There was no consultation with me. I was simply informed it was cancelled, and it was dead in the water.¹

In spring 2003, Home Box Office (HBO) abruptly jettisoned its planned and commissioned broadcast of *Comandante*, Oliver Stone's documentary on Cuban President Fidel Castro. As outlined in Chapter 2, the news caused barely a murmur in the US media. The *New York Times* reported in passing in a review of another of Stone's documentaries, *Persona Non Grata* (2003), that HBO's decision appeared to be an editorial one.² That Stone's film was too sympathetic seemed to be the reason (or excuse, depending on your point of view). An additional explanation was that there was a need for more balancing material that was critical of Castro, and would throw the 'dictator's' forty-five-year rule into a slightly more complex light. Ever the pragmatist, Stone duly complied when others might have said far more or retreated from the battle altogether and left the project in limbo. In fact, the result of this additional material was a *second* documentary on Castro – *Looking for Fidel* – that was broadcast by HBO in 2004. In a review in the *Chicago Tribune* that April, Mark Caro heralded the new film as a 'sequel to the movie that never was', touting Stone as a much more

determined prosecutor this time around, particularly in the light of recent arrests, detentions of journalists and even executions of dissidents that had taken place on the island in the intervening time between the two features.³ 'If *Looking for Fidel* provides few definitive answers, at least this time Stone is asking the right questions,' concluded Caro. Stone's insight certainly gave an alternative persona to the leader few knew about; but for all its handheld edginess and point-of-view camerawork, it still observed the myth and propaganda shining through the fading mystique. *Looking for Fidel* (see also Chapter 2) fulfilled most of its obligations, and yet the cancellation of its companion piece *Comandante* was not rescinded, even though the film was shown on television later in Canada. Stone suspected dirty work at play. The lobbying of HBO's corporate owners, Time Warner, probably by Cuban exile groups in Miami and quite possibly also by the White House, were among Stone's suspicions.⁴ The backdrop to this controversy was, after all, the launch by President Bush in March 2003 of full-scale military operations in Iraq backed up by the president's stated post-9/11 ideological conviction that *everyone* was either 'with us or with the terrorists'.⁵ The film's cancellation captured the mood of the times and was symptomatic of a country clamping down on any alternative history. However, speculative and beyond easy confirmation these thoughts may have been, they still encapsulated something that Stone had been trying to say about the public accountability of corporate media organisations, and the undue influence (sought or unsought) of government in what gets reported, since he had first locked horns with the media nearly two decades previously.

Corporations – private and public – their activities, and their tenuous accountability were stalking the back corridors of Stone's oeuvre almost from the outset. The script he wrote for Michael Cimino's *Year of the Dragon* (1985) involves the cosy relationship between the New York Police Department and the New York offshoots of the Hong Kong triads. In one scene, Stanley White (Mickey Rourke) outlines to his reporter friend Tracy Tzu (Ariane) where he thinks the real problem lies: 'You want to know what's destroying this country? ... It's TV, it's media, it's people like you – vampires.'

In Stone's iconic glimpse into the morality of Wall Street two years later, individual choices and the moral as well as financial and

legal corruption of money are explored further. However, in the central expository speech at the annual stockholders' meeting of Teldar Paper, Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas) asserts that greed will save the company *and* the malfunctioning corporation called the USA in one fell swoop. Retrospectively, Stone confirmed this scene as being one of the most important in the film. Corporate management was being lauded as some kind of superhero force in these years, and yet in reality it had become weak and self-serving, in Stone's view. However, he also affirmed where the potential for good within American corporations lay, and how the forces of nationalism and patriotism could be countered within their boardrooms and trading floors.⁶ It was a hopeful stance that would not last long with Stone. He later concluded that little had changed since the late 1980s; far from countering the forces of America's capitalist behemoth, corporations were, and remained, instrumental in driving those same forces forward.

In 1988, a year after *Wall Street*, Stone returned to corporations, but this time in an entertainment context rather than a financial one. He released the critically well-received but low-key *Talk Radio*, confirming that, in the wake of his comments about *Wall Street*, he had not developed some misty-eyed embrace of corporate America. *Talk Radio* was a carefully worked argument about the cultural and societal dangers posed by the operation and limited accountability of media organisations, with hints towards Clint Eastwood's *Play Misty for Me* (1971) as well as *Network* (Sidney Lumet, 1976) and *Nashville* (Robert Altman, 1975).

Six years later, *Natural Born Killers* (1994) was an all-out assault on the same corporate threat: a critique of the 1990s entertainment and news media industry, and where it was headed if left unchecked. Stone's ability to deliver an on-screen indictment of entertainment news, while at the same time becoming embroiled in an off-screen dispute about the rating of the film, then a running battle with the media, and eventually the Louisiana courts over First Amendment rights of free speech and allegations that the film had precipitated copycat killings, was simultaneously helpful and problematic for his case. Problematic because the legal battle raged on for some years – a result of involvement from the novelist John Grisham, who linked *Natural Born Killers* to the murder of a friend – and because Stone committed personal time and money

to his defence while often being characterised as the offending party. Helpful in the sense that Warner Bros. took up the cudgel of defence, contributing an estimated \$1 million to see off a case that they and Stone judged as a major infringement on their freedom of creativity and expression.⁷ Stone later reflected:

If Beethoven's symphonies had driven a mild gardener to the point of insanity, the symphonies could be blamed for it. Or a Picasso painting could be the cause of someone's partial blindness or psychotic fractured thoughts resulting during a sex act or something. Picasso would take the fall, and it would be the end of art and culture as we know it. There can be *no* interpretation of any event – it would flatten out society to its extreme. *That* was the issue. If that case had been successfully prosecuted, it would've been a nightmare for Hollywood as well as other industries. It might not have succeeded in the end, and it might also have been overturned at some point by a sane Court. But if it had put its odious morality in place, there would've been a major implosion of our culture.⁸

Warner Bros. and Stone prevailed, and the director's continuing high profile ensured that *Natural Born Killers* and its subject matter were noticed and debated at length. However, was Stone a prophet or a hypocrite on the issues within the film? Even some of his supporters were unsure, and his critics were happy to play along with the caricature of an 'America-hating' degenerate all too willing to cash in while claiming some supposed moral high ground. In time, the film became lauded as something of a cult classic, as well as legally winning its case. The State of Louisiana Court of Appeal eventually concurred with Stone's comment above, and reaffirmed his First Amendment rights – despite condemning the glorification of violence that the court perceived the film to be relishing in all-too-frequently.⁹

A further five years passed once more between *Natural Born Killers* and additional media or entertainment scrutiny, this time with sport as the central motif. *Any Given Sunday* (1999), Stone's first and only foray into 'sports movie' territory was a typically bravado piece, and is often ascribed the much more conservative treatise of masculine, misogynistic mannerisms that better represented other football films. Coming at the end of a self-imposed near-exile from the industry since *Nixon* in 1995 – with only *U Turn* (1997) in-between times – *Any Given Sunday* represented a

continuation of the corporate enquiry, but proved a watershed for Stone's own auteur brand. Following personal crisis and professional disappointment, the film was a return to a more complex and intensive production environment, as well as a reconfiguration of Stone's social commentary. He had absorbed some of the hard lessons from the mid-1990s, and had effected a significant reorientation in his personal approach to work and reception: waking up, he said, with the cup half-full rather than half-empty.¹⁰ Part of that reorientation was a much more intricate mix of issues, whereby *Any Given Sunday* carried important anti-corporate commentary into scenarios involving gender, corporate greed and dominant conservative tendencies.

Yet if Hollywood's favourite *bête noire* appeared to be retreating into some kind of safe ideological obscurity, he followed this football film by directing his first two Castro documentaries and the fascinating *Persona Non Grata*, another side-swerve that wrong-footed many of his critics. The move was consistent with wider industry trends, with documentary in the ascendant and less industry appetite for polemical drama. James McEnteer asserted that political documentary filmmaking was becoming a response to the 'corporatization and trivialization of news' in the early 2000s.¹¹ *W.* (2008), *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* (2010) and *Savages* (2012) all reasserted the Stone template of corporate enquiry, but tangentially – reflecting both changes in the director, and the sensibilities of the film industry itself.

Stone himself noted that premium cable TV channels including HBO were offering much greater freedoms to directors than theatrical distribution to tell their tales in more raucous and incendiary fashion.¹² The space for polemical drama contracted for a time after 9/11, and Stone concluded that documentary might offer the best opportunity to make his institutional point.¹³ Yet his own experience offered clear evidence of a growing problem for the USA as a functioning democracy: how to service the need for competing views and narratives – the 'marketplace of ideas' – in an environment where news and entertainment executives did not want to appear to be on the 'wrong side' of the administration's 'War on Terror'. Recognising, much less saying something of that post-9/11 change was proving terribly difficult to do. By the time that the *Untold History* project began to form as an idea in late 2007, the

fact that the media had so little to say about the condition of the USA galvanised Stone to press on with a series underwritten by the idea that the pursuit of empire was an economic project for the USA as much as it was a political one, and that American corporate interests were invariably the (major) beneficiaries of whatever intervention the government had initiated in the post-Second World War era.

In the light of this career trajectory, this chapter traces two key threads in Stone's exploration of corporations through the films above, and their impact on wider society: one to do with the media, and the other concerning government. In *Any Given Sunday*, Stone returned to some of the themes of media manipulation that he had tackled in *Talk Radio*. The first part of this chapter revisits these two films, exploring how and why the critique of corporations manifested itself in a particular way during this era. Despite less politically insistent dramas in the period after *Any Given Sunday*, Stone continued to give attention to the effects of corporate influence, but channelled these through documentary and an altered feature film dynamic. His Castro documentaries were nothing less than a direct challenge to what he saw as the bias within mainstream media organisations towards anything that might constitute a provocation to dominant national narratives. His third presidential biopic, *W.*, had things to say about corporate and government accountability too, as did *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* and *Savages*.

However, Stone's critique was perhaps at its most urgent in the *Untold History* series. His early career embrace of a more benign view of corporate America manhandled by dubious speculators – verbalised up to and including *Wall Street* – shifted towards an increasingly insistent denouncing of the establishment itself and what Stone saw as the folly of empire, corporately driven. As he progressed with the project, it became increasingly obvious to him that 'empire' meant not simply the advancement of US corporate interests in the promulgation of everything from hamburgers to smartphones, but to the corporatisation of the military itself.¹⁴ Indeed, the Edward Snowden story that Stone was drawn to by 2014, explicitly revealed the extent to which the use of commercial contractors had become integral to the emergence of a 'global security state'.¹⁵ The USA had become, in Stone's words, a 'corporate oligarchy', and war was now its stratagem of choice.¹⁶ With its

emphasis on the maintenance of empire, the *Untold History* series helped lay the groundwork for Stone's critique of the global security apparatus, and this in turn provided a natural lead-in for Stone to the drama of the Snowden story.

Thus, documentary acted as a counter-view to the corporate infotainment complex, but the *Untold History* series additionally functioned as a source of self-education on the complexities of US history and politics, providing the precursor to an emerging treatise that linked critiques of government with those of business, media and defence corporations. It is a treatise that draws its inspiration ultimately from the roots of American democracy: one dedicated to a less interventionist government, and one where Jeffersonian views of democracy and power predominate.¹⁷

Talk Radio

Stone's on-screen engagement with the issues of media influence, sophistry and corporate power commenced with his watchable, yet largely overlooked, study of broadcasting, *Talk Radio*, released in 1988. The film was loosely based on the events leading up to the assassination in 1984 of combative radio talk show host Alan Berg by white supremacists in Denver, Colorado. The screenplay credits were shared by Stone and Eric Bogosian, the latter having written an earlier play about the murder, with the story later amplified in a book on Berg by Stephen Singular.¹⁸ The key theme, as Don Kunz notes, is about corruption: the corruption of ambition that destroys personal relationships; the corruption of greed that embraces on-air insult as a legitimate route to corporate revenue, even as it incites criminal activity; and the corruption of espoused belief that reaches its audience segment with references to the Christian creed, while transforming that same creed into undisguised ethnocentrism.¹⁹

The film opens over Dallas at dusk. A radio station broadcasts a weather warning, anchoring the story in the heartland of America. The visuals and audio then bring the audience into the station, eavesdropping on *Night Talk* hosted by Barry Champlain (Eric Bogosian). His opening monologue rails against 'lying, whoring and intoxication' and closes with an ironic quip: 'Talk Radio. It's the last neighbourhood in town. People just don't talk to each other anymore.' It is immediately apparent how political engagement is

being supplanted with a fun-making, yet often callous, mode of entertainment passed off as community spirit within Champlain's manipulative rhetoric. Stone opens the film out to explore the impact, and efforts by local station manager Dan (Alec Baldwin) to sell the show to a media company that would allow national syndication.

Champlain agrees to the deal on-air, but does so by reminding his new sponsor that he will not soften his touch or 'go a little easier'. He already sees himself as speaking truth to power, but now he will be able to address a bigger audience. Champlain's invitation to his audience to join him on this wider stage highlights two contradictions in his stance. First, his personal ambition pushes him to become a part of the system that he seeks to criticise. In making that transition, he fails to recognise the irony of his position: that the 'system' is nothing more than a collection of individuals like him, often doing the same thing. Second, his hectoring style of delivery, predicated on the belief that 'somebody better do something', helps to reify the possibility of direct action to the point where active engagement is substituted for a generalised rage and hatred. The solution he offers is an entertainment medium that plays at being the concerned neighbour, yet really only showcases the prejudices of his audiences and his own invective.

Norman Kagan argues that the underlying message, applying to Rush Limbaugh and Oprah Winfrey as well as to Barry Champlain, is that 'the world is crazy!'.²⁰ However, the screenplay also suggests a more self-reflective indictment: a collective complicity in the foregrounding of self-loathing as entertainment. While Champlain's 'neighbourhood' is invited to turn to itself for explanation and to outsiders for blame, the result is a mode of destructiveness that leaves unchallenged the agenda of the organisations that directly affect the lives of his listeners: government and media corporations. Champlain's death and replacement at the end of the film highlights this insulation from challenge. His death becomes material that itself can be cycled into the caller narratives. Everything has changed, yet also remains the same.

Talk Radio questioned artistic authenticity: a central theme of the media portrayal to come in *Natural Born Killers*. We are invited to reflect on the role of talk radio, Kunz suggests, as either a legitimate campaign against the disintegration of a certain kind of American

culture of respect and integrity, or the pandering to a base interest in demeaning entertainment.²¹ In short, the film poses the question: is talk radio part of the solution or the problem? At least some of the negative media response to *Natural Born Killers* was predicated on the conclusion that Stone and his film were prominent examples of the problem about declining media standards, rather than an authentic effort to call attention to that decline. Part of the reason that such a question did not arrive with *Talk Radio* lies in the application of two wildly different treatments.

Talk Radio's set-up allows the issue of entertainment exploitation to be raised in a more abstract, intellectualised form. As the narrative unfolds, we see how the promises that the corporation can offer – fame, wealth – play to Champlain's conceit in a way that gradually undermines his relationship with all of those around him. However, the film avoids descending into a homily about the evils of corporate America by the prominence given to the on-air sequences, where Champlain is taking calls from his audience. The sequences provide a tableau of prejudice that few audience members would register as inauthentic. The intercutting of the on-air sequences with the main narrative provided a ready space for cinemagoers to reflect on the implications of the story. Is Champlain simply the conduit for a wider debate in US society? Or is he an agent provocateur who profits from airing prejudice? How does the relationship between the audience, Champlain and the corporation work, and whose needs are being served?

By contrast, in *Natural Born Killers*, Stone shifted the audience from the position of observer to willing or unwilling participant. The abstraction has been exchanged for a demonstration of the subject matter. The audience is thrust into the bloody carnage, into the midst of the lives of the most deranged of the callers we hear from in *Talk Radio*. While the differences in treatment between *Talk Radio* and *Natural Born Killers* certainly must have contributed to the negative assessments of the latter film, it remains hard to overlook the complicating effect produced by the change that Stone's profile had undergone between the two films. He was judged by his excesses now as much as he had been by his caustic and provocative movies before.

Of course, related to this shift in perception were the changes in the industry and the country. Stone may have become more

provocative to some, but the tableau itself against which he was being judged was changing, and his place in it was less clear. In the period between *Talk Radio* and *Natural Born Killers*, Sony had acquired Columbia (1989), Matsushita had acquired Universal (1990), Time had bought Warner Bros. and Viacom had taken over Paramount (1993). The studios were becoming enmeshed in multi-platform global enterprises with interests in music, film, news and entertainment.²² As Christensen and Haas have noted, the appetites of this global entertainment complex for ideologically controversial content were very limited.²³ Culturally, the USA was in the embrace of a post-Cold War period of self-congratulation perhaps best illustrated by Francis Fukuyama's 1992 publication *The End of History and the Last Man*,²⁴ with its conceit that the liberal democracies (led by the USA) had reached the pinnacle of cultural evolution.

Adherents of this thinly disguised piece of neo-conservative rhetoric could bask in the afterglow of the first Gulf War and the emergence of a new lone superpower: truly the final word on the emergence of the 'American Century' trumpeted by Henry Luce fifty years earlier. Against this changing backdrop, *Talk Radio* had sat comfortably within an era of film writing and production that had been celebrated for a discreet set of cinematic critiques including *Reds* (Warren Beatty, 1981), *Missing* (Costa Gavras, 1982), *Silkwood* (Mike Nichols, 1983), and of course Stone's own *Salvador* (1986), *Platoon* (1986) and *Wall Street*. By the time that *Natural Born Killers* arrived in cinemas, US audiences were more likely to be savouring *The Bodyguard* (Mick Jackson, 1992), *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993), *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994) and *The Lion King* (Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff, 1994). Only in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994), fêted by the Academy with a Oscar for Best Screenplay and six further nominations, did some of the arguments about violence and media infiltration resonate.

By the mid-1990s, then, Stone was experiencing a kind of brand paradox. His early successes and piercing observations of recent American history had established a bankable brand identity that had been finally able to conceive of Vietnam in a way he wanted to document it, and criticised the consuming greed of the financial system in the manner about which he felt passionately. The controversies over *JFK* (1991) and *Natural Born Killers* did not diminish

Stone's standing, but they had galvanised a new and destabilising aspect to the author brand that was being used by Stone's detractors in the media to redefine him and his work. His own cinematic evolution seemed increasingly to be running in a diametrically opposed direction to the predilections of the industry and, indeed, the country.

Any Given Sunday

Real men drink beer

The National Football League's (NFL) dispute with its players in spring 2011 over sharing revenues may not have set American football apart from other major sporting leagues in the USA and elsewhere, but the sums involved were significant. In 2010, the team owners had drawn \$1 billion from the total \$9 billion annual revenues to help finance stadiums and the NFL cable channel – but had sought to increase the annual allocation to \$2 billion for 2011. Despite a downward revision of their demand to \$320 million in the course of meetings in early March, the players were unmoved and the players' union opted to dissolve itself.²⁵ This 'decertification' was intended to allow players the flexibility to seek an injunction, should the NFL impose a lockout. The NFL duly delivered, immediately proceeding to impose a lockout of players, threatening the annual training camps due to start in August as well as the season itself, due to begin in early September. In April a District Court judge ordered the lifting of the six-week lockout, but the NFL successfully delayed the implementation of the District Court decision in the Court of Appeal.²⁶ As the clock ticked down towards the start of the new season, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell and players' leader, Executive Director of the NFL Players Association, DeMaurice Smith, worked towards a compromise agreement which, while it did not increase the overall share of revenues for players, did make additional provision for players in retirement. Agreement was reached in July 2011.

The dispute over revenues is one of two prominent debates within the sport. The other – the long-term health effects of playing – is an issue in its own right, as well as one with repercussions for the question of revenues. The death of NFL wide receiver Chris Henry in November 2009 appeared to mark a watershed in the

issue of safety in a contact sport where concussions are commonplace. He was by no means the first player to be diagnosed with Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE), but of the twenty-three deaths recorded since 2002, he was the first still to be playing football when he died. The condition, which produces depression and mood swings and eventually leads to dementia, is a recent symptom of a trend towards increasing on-field violence that appears to be linked both to the increasing size of footballers, and the rigours of their training.²⁷ The revenue dispute broke out against the backdrop of news in February 2011 of the suicide of a former Chicago Bears star, Dave Duerson. The NFL had already acknowledged the longer-term health issues faced by retired footballers with the introduction in February 2007 of a scheme, supported by the NFL Players Association, to fund medical care for former footballers suffering from dementia. Also in 2008, the Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy Center was established by a number of former athletes in conjunction with researchers at Boston University to study the long-term effects of concussion injuries. Duerson, who had shot himself through the heart, had left instructions that his brain be donated to the Center.

The recent history of, and debates about, the game have leavened the mix of money and safety with other controversies, including questions concerning the use of performance-enhancing and recreational drugs, as well as suggestions of racism in a business world where corporate entities were populated predominantly by older white men running a sport where 60 per cent of the players were African American.²⁸ In *Any Given Sunday* Stone sought to address the complexities of the game in a way that aired these interwoven issues, while bringing the audience into the intricacies of action on the field of play. The on-field sequences were constructed and filmed in a way that allowed the audience to share the players' perspective on plays, and gain some sense of the confrontation and violence of the tackles.

Stone's interest in gridiron stretched back to an unfilmed treatment he had produced in the early 1980s, titled 'The Linebacker'. The subsequent development of the final screenplay involved a complex mix of sub-projects and collaborations, reflecting the unstable world of studio ownership in Hollywood. A script titled *Not for Long* by Jamie Williams (a former San Francisco 49er) and

Richard Weiner (a correspondent with the *New York Times*) had been rewritten as *Monday Night*, with Cinergi Pictures involved. A second screenplay, written by playwright John Logan and titled *Any Given Sunday*, had been sent to Stone and given backing by Turner Pictures, which hoped to combine it with *Monday Night*. Meanwhile, Warner Bros. had optioned a book by a former football medic Dr Robert Huizenga, titled *You're Okay, It's Just a Bruise: A Doctor's Sideline Secrets*. It was transformed by Dan Pyne into a screenplay titled *Playing Hurt*. Along the way, Cinergi sold its interest to Turner Pictures and the latter merged with Warner Bros., which meant that by December 1996 the rights to all three screenplays belonged to Warner Bros.

Warner Bros. was happy to have Stone on board, and work progressed on *Any Given Sunday* during February and March 1997. The central theme was very much a paean to the traditions of the sport, presented in shorthand as life being a game of inches overlaid with teamwork. However, the screenplay proved not to be to the liking of the NFL, whose cooperation had been sought. Following advice from businessman and talent agent Michael Ovitz in May 1998 on how best to approach the NFL, Stone forwarded a script to Neil Austrian, who was the NFL's president and chief operating officer. Austrian replied on 20 July 1998 that the script 'does not properly represent either the players or the National Football League'.²⁹ A major concern for Austrian was the representation of drug use, and he wrote to club owners four days later advising them that the NFL would not be cooperating with the production. With encouragement from producer Clayton Townsend, Stone persisted and, for a time, the relationship with Austrian at least appeared on the surface to be improving.³⁰ However, a rapprochement in November soon evaporated. Austrian wrote to Townsend on 10 December 1998, rejecting a revised script and withdrawing all cooperation with the use of logos and team names in the film.³¹ As a result, the fictitious Association of Football Franchises of America (AFFA) and the Pantheon Cup were introduced into the screenplay, along with the strips and logos of the featured teams, including the Miami Sharks, Minnesota Americans, Chicago Rhinos and New York Emperors.

A brief pause ensued in early December, as Warner Bros. assessed the option of shutting down the production. Stone argued

for a continuance and pressed on with script revisions, eventually winning the argument. Before the New Year, the project was underway once more, now budgeted at just over \$48 million with a sixty-day shoot. The budget included provision for a ten-week football camp – a reprise of the kind of preparatory methodology that had been used on *Platoon*.

With a cast including Jamie Foxx, Al Pacino, Cameron Diaz and Dennis Quaid, plus James Woods, LL Cool J and several former professional footballers including Jim Brown and Lawrence Taylor, shooting got underway in late January 1999. The story focuses on the Miami Sharks football team and the efforts of their coach Tony D'Amato (Al Pacino) to reverse their string of poor performances. In the film's opening sequence we see the team's quarterback Jack 'Cap' Rooney (Dennis Quaid) and his replacement sustain injuries, and D'Amato must rely on the second replacement Willie Beamen (Jamie Foxx). Although the Sharks lose the game, Beamen performs well, and his elevation becomes the vehicle with which Stone explores issues of celebrity, corporate sponsorship and medical ethics. Beamen's unorthodox approach to the playbook and his emerging sense of self-importance as media attention increases, combine to generate tensions with D'Amato. These tensions produce knock-on consequences for D'Amato's working relationship with his boss and team owner, Christina Pagniacchi (Cameron Diaz).

On the morning after the game the action moves to Pagniacchi's home, where she is in discussion with two of her advisors about how the team might leverage finance from the City of Miami for a new stadium. One of Pagniacchi's advisors, Ed (James Karen), comments that Pagniacchi should consider leaving the business: 'Start over, start a family. You don't love football.' As her gender credentials in a patriarchal world are questioned, the theme is continued when D'Amato's arrival produces a heated confrontation between the two because Pagniacchi wants to sell Rooney and use the money to help rebuild the team, while D'Amato is resistant. The ensuing exchange rehearses questions of loyalty to individuals as opposed to the team, but all the while the mixture of economics and gender is never far from the surface. Pagniacchi is positioned as the greedy corporate owner, while D'Amato becomes the bastion of personal integrity. As the discussion draws to a close, Pagniacchi intimates that D'Amato's contract may be terminated at the end

of the year. His response – that he settled his contract with her father over a beer and a handshake – echoes the paternalistic sentiment that she has heard just a few minutes earlier from her advisor. Thus Pagniacchi is confronted with a questioning of her authority that conflates her relative youth and gender: a stereotype that Diaz was sensitive to in the role. In a pre-shooting discussion with Stone in November 1998, she had voiced a concern that her character appeared to be using sexuality as her principal asset. Stone accepted the concern, and spent time with colleagues Dr Robert Huizenga and Lisa Amsterdam working on the screenplay still further. One result was the increased emphasis on Pagniacchi having grown up around the business and the team. The removal of any explicitly sexual element in Pagniacchi's character served to highlight the ways in which she was being patronised by Ed and D'Amato: a theme that is reinforced later in the film both in her discussion with the mayor about a new stadium, and shortly after her encounter with the Commissioner (Charlton Heston) where he comments, out of her earshot, that she would 'eat her young'.

In Stone's own assessment of the film, one of the key messages is about the importance of channelling individual ambition for the benefit of the team. Stone is concerned with the deleterious effects of corporate culture, some of which is built into Pagniacchi's obsession with economics and wider corporate responsibilities. Elsewhere the critique of corporate culture is equally sure-footed.

One of the most powerful sequences in the film concerns the creation of the Willie Beamen brand. This process begins to take shape at the end of the Sharks game against Chicago on the computer screen of sports journalist Jack Rose (John C. McGinley), who is constructing his post-match report. As he lauds Beamen's playing abilities we see the beginnings of a new media persona emerging: 'Beamen is a lethal combination of mobility and escapability ... A warrior poet ... a new breed of athlete.' Later at the Sharks' charity event with Miami mayor Tyrone Smalls (Clifton Davis), the mayor offers his own assessment in an aside to Beamen: 'You are a model for your people now, Willie Beamen. A black man on a parade. Stand tall!'

By the end of the next game Beamen has been anointed 'Steamin' Beamen' by TV announcer Tug Kowalski (Stone himself), and we see shortly afterwards a media montage of sports magazine covers,

a soft drinks commercial video and a charity appearance that confirm Beamen's deification. He is becoming a poster boy for the corporate interests that rely on the popularity of the sport. In a television interview with Rose, Beamen becomes dazzled with his own reflection. He begins by calling attention to racial imbalances in the sport, noting that while 70 per cent of the players are African American, very few coaches and no owners are black. However, the thrust of his critique is lost as he segues into a personal assessment that mixes the subjects of race and his sporting ethos together: 'It's all about winning. I mean that's what this country is about, being number one. This whole country was built on kicking immigrant ass – African ass, Chinese ass, don't-matter-who ass.' Beamen is already finding his stride as celebrity pundit. His interview bravado finishes with a description of his special powers on the field. However, these are quickly neutralised in the next game against the Emperors by the other team players' unwillingness to work for Beamen, and he must slowly come to terms with the arguments made to him earlier by D'Amato that success depends on leadership, team play and discipline.

The narrative in *Any Given Sunday* follows a trajectory of growth, crisis and rebirth: for Beamen, his relationship, the team and D'Amato, but not entirely for Pagniacchi. The film airs the various tensions between individual success, team effectiveness, media coverage and corporate ambition, but in a way that aligns masculinity with integrity, and femininity with exploitation. Beamen learns the importance of team play from D'Amato; he even learns to accept advice from Cap. Separately he seeks to correct his wayward personal life with a renewal of his relationship with his partner Vanessa (Lela Rochon): she is happy to respond to his overture. D'Amato's traditional paternalism concerning Cap and Luther 'Shark' Lavay (Lawrence Taylor) – concerns that keep Cap in the team, and make Shark aware of the risks that his injuries pose – is presented as the antithesis of Pagniacchi's ambition, which manifests itself in her application of pressure on team doctor Harvey Mandrake (James Woods) to drop Cap and conceal the risk to Shark. Her encounter with the commissioner leaves her nonplussed, and her unrelenting pursuit of corporate goals through a franchise bid for a new Los Angeles team is dealt with by the commissioner and his colleagues in typically patrician fashion at a hearing in

New York. That her gender is part of the issue has been exposed in an earlier scene, when she hears her mother tell D'Amato that he was the son that Pagniaci's father really wanted. The real tension between Pagniaci and D'Amato is a symbolic sibling rivalry in which D'Amato's stance is vindicated. In the closing seconds of the Knights game, Pagniaci confides to her mother that things are out of control, and wonders aloud if it is her who is losing perspective. She apologises to her mother for her behaviour. After the game, D'Amato reminds Beamen of the game's ethos: on any given Sunday, you are either going to win or lose. Beamen completes the aphorism: can you win or lose like a man?³ Finally, during the closing titles, Pagniaci gives a speech at a news conference in which she talks about her father's legacy and the bond with Miami, and then submissively acknowledges the debt she owes to D'Amato for helping her understand what she had forgotten. D'Amato accepts the gesture, but he has one final way of asserting his superiority in this contest. Not only is he leaving for a new management challenge in Albuquerque that will take him back to the spiritual heart of the game, but he has signed Beamen as his quarterback.

The complexities of the screenplay's production, obstacles to access for location shooting, budget questions and casting issues all bear testament to the size and scale of this project and Stone's ambitions for it, as writer and director. Bob Daly, chair of Warner Bros. was pleased with the result, and US audiences – especially those in the mid-west, middle-American brackets – supported the effort with a \$75 million gross.³² *Any Given Sunday* was one of a select few sports movies during the decade that seemed to catch the popular imagination. Tony Scott's *The Fan* (1996) and Sam Raimi's *For Love of the Game* (1999) were big-budget failures, while *Days of Thunder* (1990), also directed by Scott, Penny Marshall's *A League of Their Own* (1992) and most notably *Jerry Maguire* (Cameron Crowe, 1996) all prospered. *Jerry Maguire* shared some of *Any Given Sunday*'s pretensions in pursuing similar 'small is beautiful' anti-corporate themes, but with a more upbeat, romanticised narrative about a plucky corporate hustler reinventing himself in the world of sports agents. The film grossed some \$150 million at the US box office, confirming its credentials as part of the raft of 1990s feel-good movies, or 'capitalism capers' that filled screens in that immediate post-Cold War and Gulf War moment.

Any Given Sunday was more complex by comparison, foregrounding personal courage and making the cut-and-thrust of corporatised sport an interloper in on-field politics and conduct. This was a more nuanced commentary on the dislocation between traditional values concerning collaboration and teamwork, and the corporate environment within which the game is played. Thus the critique in *Any Given Sunday* presaged themes of corporate dysfunction picked up much later in *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* and *Savages*. The manufacture of Beamen's image by news and entertainment media is seen within the diegesis as shallow and ultimately self-defeating, both physically and spiritually. However, the resolution to this disturbance – the return to a hinterland of more personalised and traditional values – is not entirely a progressive one, even as it seeks to pull against corporate influence. The paternalism directed against Pagniacchi early on in the film has a taint of atavism about it, and yet in the denouement Stone appears to celebrate that same response. Pagniacchi the woman is the embodiment of the wayward corporation.

This complexity aside, the film's wistful veneration of a smaller, more personal world of local football leagues spoke of a paradox felt by many sports fans, who celebrated tradition while embracing the world of corporate franchise football entertainment. It was a cultural yearning that gave vent to the belated success of NBC's *Friday Night Lights* from the mid-2000s, about a college football team in Texas. Meanwhile, the NFL had risen corporately far from its humble beginnings in the 1920s. Between 1970 and the millennium, under commissioners Pete Rozelle and later Paul Tagliabue, the League developed and exploited both television rights and a highly successful licensing arm. Its own television station, NFL Network, launched in 2003 broadcasting globally, although it attracted criticism at times for its apparent avarice, and has been routinely in disagreement about fees with Time Warner Cable and Comcast.³³

Forbes magazine's 2009 description of the Dallas Cowboys' new stadium as a 'gold mine' not only turned out to be figuratively true, but could be reasonably used to sum up the finances of nearly all major NFL teams.³⁴ The average value of a franchise was estimated by *Forbes* in 2012 to be \$1.04 billion. Clearly, a key part of revenue is television, and *Forbes* further estimated that the deals with CBS, ESPN, Fox and NBC earned an estimated \$3.1 billion annually for the NFL.³⁵

Equally contentious has been the question of public money funding stadium construction: an issue that *Any Given Sunday* draws attention to, if only briefly. Bloomberg reported in 2012 that there were, at that point, twenty-one NFL teams playing in stadiums built or renovated using tax-free public borrowing. The accepted wisdom has been that these deals are good for local economies, and indeed cities have vied with each other to attract teams to their locality, despite evidence that the deals bring poor long-term value to the communities and depress federal tax revenue. Paradoxically, a provision in the Tax Reform Act of 1986 – which restricted application of the tax exemption to circumstances where the debt payment from private business revenue did not exceed ten per cent of the total payment – has resulted in city administrations borrowing more tax-exempt funds to ensure that the sports franchise can meet this obligation.³⁶ Overall, Bloomberg estimated that the total loss to the US taxpayer on \$17 billion of debt raised for sports structures since 1986 amounted to \$4 billion. The real beneficiaries appeared to be the teams themselves.

In its own way, *Any Given Sunday* spoke to a myth about millennial America, offering up the promise of a return to a time of honour when deals were done over a beer and with a handshake, when the reality was more of a shakedown. In a sense, the film offered middle-American males what it offered Stone: a chance to feel in control again.

Corporate dysfunction

Any Given Sunday sits more or less midway between *Natural Born Killers* and *Comandante*, and in its construction and reception it represents a pause as well as a transition point. In every sense, *Natural Born Killers* was a sign of a director on the edge. From the organised chaos of the production to the arguments over the rating, to the inflamed press coverage after the film's release, Stone had set the entire edifice of his career on fire in the pursuit of a vision of America's cultural descent into on-screen and off-screen violence. Many observers thought that Stone was seeking to have his cake and eat it: profiting from a satire about on-screen violence that itself seemed to break new boundaries in taste and artistic responsibility. Arguably, *Nixon's* reception was tainted by the

fallout. In different ways, *U Turn* and *Any Given Sunday* were signs of gradual recovery from the effects of the mid-1990s: a return to filmmaking, and then to mainstream approval. However, the decision to develop the documentary on Castro brought Stone back to a more studied critique of American media corporations.

Stone was well aware that it was more difficult to reach a wider audience with documentary, but the new millennium added commercial impetus to the genre. As James McEnteer has described, there appeared to be a discernible renaissance in documentary filmmaking: arguably, a passing of the torch within American political cinema from dramatists to documentarians.³⁷ The work of Michael Moore, Alex Gibney, Eugene Jarecki, Barbara Kopple, Errol Morris, Charles Ferguson, Kirby Dick, Robert Greenwald, Davis Guggenheim and Leslie Iwerks all confirmed this tendency. Yet as Stone's experience with *Comandante* had demonstrated, documentary was not an easy fix for the issues posed by the presence of a small number of companies which controlled much of the distribution space to which filmmakers needed access. Even Moore's success with *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) had come only after a dispute between the producer Miramax and its parent company Disney, in which the latter had sought to block release of the film in the USA, apparently because Disney was mindful of its operations in Florida: a state which happened to have a governor who was the brother of the president.³⁸ HBO's failure to broadcast *Comandante* highlighted the same kind of corporate gatekeeping which had the power to influence the marketplace of ideas. So while documentary filmmakers seemed to be taking up the slack in offering challenges to the corporatisation of news media, they still confronted issues of media ownership and the possibility of censorship.

While acknowledging the problem, Stone pressed on with his critique of news media. In parallel with the work on Castro, he broadened his challenge of what he saw as a wilful lack of balance in the coverage of political leaders who were not regarded as friends in Washington, DC with his retrospective of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez in *South of the Border* (2010). The reaction in the mainstream press was as Stone might have predicted. Stephen Holden's piece in the *New York Times* caustically reminded readers that this was the same director who had brought *JFK* to the world.³⁹ The reference back to *that* picture highlighted the point that Stone

was trying to make about bias. It also proved that his reputation itself as a challenger of establishment narratives had become part of the establishment response; his criticism of the media could be automatically dismissed as paranoia.

Holder's piece underlined how Stone's antipathy to the media was rooted in his personal experience around the time of *JFK*. Circumstantial while it might have been, questions at the heart of that film about broader institutional accountability had still not been answered. The scepticism that had underpinned *Salvador's* critique of US foreign policy was grandstanded both in Stone's use of President Eisenhower's farewell address and referencing of the military industrial complex, and in the pivotal scene involving District Attorney Jim Garrison (Kevin Costner) and X (Donald Sutherland) in *JFK*. Banks and the armaments industry were the beneficiaries, it is suggested, of Kennedy's removal, and Stone pushed the suggestion further in *Nixon* by characterising malign forces as 'the Beast', overseeing the phenomenon as a coalition of Cold War interests.⁴⁰

After *Nixon*, Stone set these concerns to one side for a time; but in the aftermath of 9/11, more specific questions about empire and the accountability of the military industrial complex began to gather momentum once again. Some of these themes were rehearsed in *W.*, *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* and *Savages*, but it was in the *Untold History* series that Stone refined his thesis and set up the line of enquiry that would lead him seamlessly to an interest in the Edward Snowden story.

In Stone's third presidential biopic, the theme of empire becomes central to the organising narrative of the discussion about invasion of Iraq. In a key scene in *W.* set in the White House situation room, vice-president Dick Cheney (Richard Dreyfuss) highlights for the president (Josh Brolin) and the others present how Iran is the only area in the region where there is no American presence. Cheney spells it out in the following terms: 'Control Iran, control Eurasia – control the world. Empire, real empire.' Stone did not suppose that the scene actually played out as depicted, but he saw it as a piece of drama that allowed him to make a point about the importance of oil in the administration's calculations – both political and economic. While Stone did not have the opportunity in the film to explore Cheney's connections to Halliburton, or the involvement

of a Halliburton subsidiary in failed reconstruction projects after the Iraq War had finished, these developments were part of the wider story that he was seeking to reference.⁴¹ Nevertheless, the news media remained a subject for Stone's disdain. In a memorable scene in *W.* featuring two news anchors, Candice Black (Anne Pressly) and Jack Hawk (Jim Garrity), the news item features the arrival by President Bush on the *USS Abraham Lincoln* to give the now-infamous 'mission accomplished' televised address on 1 May 2003. As the aircraft touches down on the aircraft carrier deck, Black marvels at the spectacle: 'He's landing on a boat at 150 miles per hour. I can't think of a Democrat that would do that.' A moment later she adds: 'Perception is reality.' Jack Hawk then chimes in: 'George Bush looks real all right. He didn't fight in the war but he looks like he did, and women love President Bush for this very reason – and women love this war, it's simple.' Stone's send-up underscored his view that Americans were being fed a diet of misinformation and pro-government opinion by all of the major news outlets. The resulting news agenda was becoming an increasingly narrow set of perspectives. The result was a population simply unequipped to hold either their elected representatives, or the business interests whose lobbyists inhabited Washington, DC, to account.

Stone reprised his treatise on corporate dysfunction in *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*. Co-written with Allan Loeb and Stephen Schiff, the film at one point showcases an expository speech by Gekko that is, in essence, a reply to the speech in the original film where he had declared that 'greed is good'. Stone – and indeed Michael Douglas – had been taken aback by the veneration that the Gekko character had received. For some at least, Gekko was to become not a salutary warning about the absence of morality or higher purpose, but something of a role model. Who better, then, to offer a riposte than Gekko himself? With some self-irony, Gekko in effect challenges the US embrace of the 'greed is good' mantra and asks his audience to reflect on the unfolding financial crisis. The thrust of the critique is that financial corporations are adding no real value to society. Gekko asserts that the three-letter-abbreviated financial instruments developed by the banking institutions can be categorised under one three letter category: WMDs. He moves on to explain that in

the previous year, 40 per cent of American corporate profits came from financial services:

Not production, not anything remotely to do with the needs of the American public ... It's as clear as a bell to those who pay attention. The mother of all evil is speculation. Leveraged debt. Bottom line? It's borrowing to the hilt – and I hate to tell you this, but it's a bankrupt business model. It won't work. It's systemic, malignant and it's global, like cancer. It's a disease, and we gotta fight back.⁴²

It was a striking conclusion. The tide that had helped float all of corporate America in the 1980s and 1990s – deregulation, leveraged debt – had now ebbed leaving a global financial crisis.

Failing banks and dysfunctional business priorities also remained a concern for Stone in the subsequent *Savages*. Themes of police corruption and lack of accountability harked back to *Year of the Dragon*, and the film ends with a press conference in which Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) agent Dennis (John Travolta) claims that the dismantling of the cartel marks a moment of progress in the efforts to protect (American) children and freedom. The irony runs deeper than the diegesis. Since 1973, when the DEA had been brought into being by President Nixon, the agency has organised itself into an international police force with access to Pentagon materials and support. At the behest of successive presidents, it has engaged in the attempted delivery of some grandiose policy objectives: Reagan's 1988 scheme for a drug-free America by 1995 being a case in point. Despite billions of dollars spent on interdiction (drug seizures in transit), particularly in Central and South America, in countries ranging from Mexico to Peru, the 'War on Drugs' initiated by Nixon remains no closer to conclusion than it had been in 1973.⁴³ For Stone, this so-called war and its failure to end, as well as the interest of financial institutions that should have known far better, was only part of the story.

The reflections about business that were embedded in *W., Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* and *Savages* were thrown into new relief as a result of the lines of enquiry that Stone followed in the research for the *Untold History* series. Corporate excess was not just about unscrupulous profiteering, but an alignment of corporate and government interests that were increasingly at odds with fundamental freedoms. For Stone, this all pointed to the unhappy summation

that the USA had become a 'corporate-controlled country'.⁴⁴ All of the dots – joining war, politics, money and corporations – led Stone to this inexorable conclusion.

Surveillance society

Stone's critique of public corporations – news media and banking – was the most prominent aspect of his commentary on the corporate empires of the post-9/11 era. However, a more far-reaching assessment of the failings of the government – with corporate defence and security contractors in its pay – was already underway. With this investigation came the spectre of Orwellian state surveillance: an apparatus-building exercise that was an obvious concern for Stone.

The *Untold History* series started out with a question concerning the immediate post-war USA, and how it might have prospered without Harry Truman or the detonation of nuclear weapons at the end of the Second World War. This was a challenge to the partisan recording of events that Stone and co-writer Peter Kuznick saw as engraved within the nation's public memory.

Their treatise about these roots of empire was summarised in two programmes that were prepared, but which ultimately failed to make the final ten-part package. In the first of these programmes, titled *World War One: The Russian Revolution and Woodrow Wilson*, government is projected as repeatedly supporting the interests of major American financiers and corporations through military intervention overseas. The chapter charts American expansionist policy under President William McKinley and his successors in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

The narration quotes from a book written by Major-General Smedley Butler who in 1935, at the end of a long career with the US Marine Corps, confessed that he had been a 'muscle man' for big business and Wall Street: a racketeer who, among other things, had made Mexico safe for American oil interests in 1914, and assisted American sugar companies in the Dominican Republic in 1916. Describing himself as a 'gangster for capitalism', Butler's thesis was summed up in the title of his book: *War is a Racket*.⁴⁵ Amplifying this theme, Stone and Kuznick argued that the USA was transformed by its financing of France and England during the Second World War from a debtor nation to a creditor: one that,

in the aftermath of the war, had been changed radically. On Stone's own evidence the picture is a complicated one. McKinley's 1900 re-election had demonstrated a popular appetite for an expansionist agenda, but there can be little doubt that the channelling of German war reparations back to US finance houses after the First World War played its part in the financial and industrial boom that was to come in the 1920s, and cemented financiers such as J. P. Morgan Jr, as well as a clutch of large corporations at the centre of US policymaking in the interwar years.

In the second programme, *Roosevelt, Hitler, Stalin: The Battle of Ideas*, Stone and Kuznick recorded how industrialists such as Henry Ford, Thomas Watson at IBM, and Alfred Sloan at General Motors profited throughout the 1930s from German subsidiaries that were instrumental in building Germany's war capabilities. Indeed Sloan, among others, would go on to claim compensation successfully for Allied bombing of his German factories. The chapter also recorded the support provided to these companies by US financial and legal companies: noting, for example, that one of Hitler's early financial backers, Fritz Thyssen, himself was supported by US finance house Brown Brothers Harriman through an account managed by Prescott Bush, the father and grandfather of two future presidents. Stone's point was simply that these details tend to be absent from conventional US-authored histories of the era, and he sought to contrast the reality of US business entanglement with the German armaments industry with the sanitised picture of American involvement in the Second World War offered by the US media, and indeed by Hollywood. Brief visual reference is made in the footage to Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), as well as books by Stephen Ambrose and Tom Brokaw – all of which, argued Stone, celebrated the military contribution of the USA while overlooking both the willingness of US industrialists to do business with the Third Reich, and the overwhelming contribution of the Russian people to the defeat of fascism in Europe.

The bulk of the series then concentrated on filling in the ensuing detail from the Second World War to the first Gulf War and the Clinton era. However, in the last chapter of the television series and the final two chapters of the book, Stone and Kuznick did assess the Bush and Obama presidencies extensively. There is much detail here, but two key themes emerge – and both are central to

Stone's critique of successive US administrations. First, the 'War on Terror' remains a racket, both in relation to defence industry expenditure and political mendacity. Second, the ever-increasing costs of surveillance – justified by the need to disrupt terrorist plots – encroached on the freedoms that the 'War on Terror' was supposed to be defending.

Much of the detail in the assessment of Bush revolves around the political preparation for, and consequences of, the invasion of Iraq: an item on the neo-conservative agenda long before the September 11 attacks. However, Stone and Kuznick also draw attention to the monies spent by government and earned by contractors such as Halliburton and Blackwater, and to the ideological fervour – or what in the light of subsequent events one might reasonably call 'hubris' – that underpinned the belief that Iraq could be quickly rebuilt as a model capitalist democracy. In the summary of the immediate aftermath of the invasion, Stone and Kuznick support their thesis that war continued to be a racket for the USA, with reference to a series of measures introduced by the Coalition Provisional Authority under administrator Paul Bremer. These included the privatisation of state-owned enterprises and banks, a provision to allow 100 per cent foreign ownership of companies, and facilities to repatriate all profits from work in Iraq. Of course, things did not quite go according to this plan.⁴⁶

In the assessment of President Barack Obama, Stone and Kuznick begin with a critique of his rejection of public campaign financing and acceptance of corporate election funding, his handling of the aftermath of the 2008 economic crash and the economy more generally, and his grip on healthcare reform. However, while much of the book's finale is devoted to foreign policy and the administration's focus on China as an adversary, Stone and Kuznick do give a closely detailed account of Obama's failure to roll back the expansion of the national security state that had taken place under his predecessor. The account includes details about the handling of the *Bradley Manning* case.⁴⁷ Manning had leaked details to Wikileaks, led by Julian Assange, that included what was, for many observers around the world, extensive evidence of US Department of State mendacity, as well as one damning piece of video evidence showing a US military helicopter crew shooting a group of civilians, including two Reuters employees, in Baghdad.

Underlying all the detail in the final part of the *Untold History* assessment was a more profound sense of disappointment in the Obama administration, given the high-profile election promises of change in autumn 2008. When Stone described Obama as a ‘snake’ in August 2013, it was, as the director himself reflected, not an off-the-cuff remark.⁴⁸ It was an expression of deep disappointment in Obama for shifting away from his pre-election promises about transparency in government.⁴⁹

Stone’s comment was linked directly to his growing concern about the issue of transparency. Manning proved to be only one of several legal cases that the Obama administration pursued under the Espionage Act of 1917. Thomas Drake’s was another.⁵⁰ Drake, an employee of the NSA, had been charged under the same Act in April 2010 for retaining national defence documents and obstructing justice. The charges related to information that Drake had revealed earlier to a journalist, detailing a failed surveillance system known as ‘Trailblazer’ which had cost the US taxpayer more than \$1 billion.⁵¹ Eventually, the charges against Drake were reduced on the eve of trial to a misdemeanour offence related to the use of a government computer, and he was exonerated – with the presiding Federal Judge Richard D. Bennett castigating the Department of Justice’s behaviour as ‘unconscionable’.⁵² Drake had followed the NSA’s internal whistleblowing protocols to the letter, and his case attracted widespread media attention and seemed to highlight the extent to which the government was prepared to go in covering up incompetence and financial irregularities at the NSA.

The Drake affair drew together two key concerns for Stone related to corporate behaviour and government surveillance, and led directly to the Edward Snowden story. In early June 2013 the *Guardian* ran several stories about NSA collection of bulk data from telephone and internet companies: activities at odds with both previous public pronouncements from the US government and the Constitution. On 10 June, the *Guardian* revealed its source as an NSA contractor, Edward Snowden.⁵³ In due course, Snowden was quoted in the *New York Times* as having followed the Thomas Drake affair closely, concluding that if he had adhered to the whistle-blower protocols as Drake had done, he and the revelations would have been buried by the NSA.⁵⁴

Inevitably, Snowden's alleged motivations became part of the media appraisal of the story. In Glenn Greenwald's book *No Place to Hide* (2014), Greenwald reveals that Snowden was in no sense a radical.⁵⁵ Snowden had enlisted in 2004, intending to fight in Iraq. However, injuries during training and concerns about attitudes within the army had led him to find another way to contribute. Attaining high-level information technology (IT) skills brought him into the orbit of the CIA and then the NSA, where he worked as a systems analyst and security expert. It was during this period, and as a consequence of the access that his security work gave him, that he became aware of the extent to which the NSA was skirting existing surveillance laws. In his interview with the *New York Times*, Snowden indicated that he felt the real issue was the lack of public debate about the reach of the surveillance programmes implemented by the NSA.

Meanwhile, Stone had been alert to the issue of transparency long before the names of Julian Assange or Edward Snowden had begun to feature in the news. In a lecture given in 2006 in London for the David Lean Foundation, Stone highlighted an issue that he and Peter Kuznick would return to six years later in the *Untold History* series:

Nor should we forget that many liberals in America ... also felt stampeded, as a result of that fear and terror of 9/11, to grant Bush his war powers. That too was a conformist mob. In the name of not being hated for our dissent, we the American people signed off, through our legislators, on our essential liberties without knowing it. I would say to you we don't even have these rights anymore, *they're gone*. Because every American I know, of any sensitivity, has some innate understanding and fear that each and every one of us can be listened upon: our email and bank accounts, our medical records, our sexual priorities known, and that at the end of the day we can be destroyed financially, reputationally, or physically by our own Government and Media, if they so wanted. The right to *any privacy* at all has been sacrificed on the altar of our 'national security'.⁵⁶

As the Snowden story broke, it brought all of these concerns fully up-to-date.⁵⁷ The *Guardian* reported in June 2014, and Stone himself later confirmed, that the director had bought the rights to *Time of the Octopus*, a forthcoming novel by Snowden's Russian lawyer

Anatoly Kucherena, and that he would use this along with *Guardian* journalist Luke Harding's book *The Snowden Files*, as source material for a screenplay.⁵⁸

Snowden's story embraced all that Stone had been working on for the previous seven years. Worries about individual freedoms signed away in the post-9/11 embrace of the Bush 'War on Terror' had not only extended the security state out of the reach of congressional oversight, let alone public accountability, but it was an irreversible process that Obama had not even tried to counter, let alone failed in the process of attempting to do so. Snowden's disclosures pointed to the extent to which the government's need to know everything about everybody had been a bonanza for IT and security contractors in the pay of the NSA. Corporate America had become completely enmeshed in the pursuit of empire: equally happy to assist drug cartels, invent get-rich schemes for the already rich that would destroy the global economy and, when called upon, happy to facilitate illegal spying on its citizens. Stone saw a moment to move away from the documentary routine that he felt had contributed to the debate in this area, and back into polemical drama that could be richly contentious, argumentative and solicitous where required.

Conclusion

Not surprisingly, Stone's perspective on corporations has evolved over the decades from a set of questions about the accountability of individual institutions and business sectors – news, television, banking – to a more general philosophy about the accountability and transparency of government towards society. Stone's early engagement with questions about entertainment media, issues of oversight and the independence of news sources in *Talk Radio* and *Natural Born Killers* provided a reflexive commentary on the topic. The measured critique in *Talk Radio* was not appreciated well enough, while the perceived excesses in *Natural Born Killers* became the media story, rather more than the critique of their gaudy mentality towards violence and misery offered by Stone. However, Stone pressed on after this with homilies towards what he saw as the vacuity of the entertainment and news industries in later films such as *Any Given Sunday* and *W*. These pictures came to see performance and politics as linked entities, and ones that

drove the director to a more 'pure' form of representation for his own peace of mind: namely, documentary.

The work on Castro and Chávez, together with the *Untold History* series, served as a platform for a widespread critique of corporate entertainment interests and government alike. Not surprisingly, that critique is decidedly anti-corporatist and is dismissive of the global pretensions not just of America's corporations, but of its government. As Stone progressed with the *Untold History* series and the theme of empire loomed larger, it became increasingly obvious to him that the individual lines of critique – media bias, reckless bankers – were simply the more visible elements of a set of shared interests and interdependencies that aligned the government and major US corporations on the one hand, and American citizens on the other. As alarming as the revelations about NSA deception concerning surveillance programmes were to Stone as challenges to constitutional freedoms, of greater concern was that these misdemeanours were underpinned by a wide network of IT and defence contractors whose business prospects and profits had become inextricably linked with a recast 'American Century'. That aspiration now called for a global surveillance and war-making capability. Remarkable as it was dispiriting, the aspiration in the wake of the Snowden affair had been met, shored up and, many argued, expanded by a Democratic Party president who had promised transparency. The drip-feed of revelations about the NSA and global security protocols – the surveillance of personal communications of US citizens, not to mention the leaders of supposed allies, the kill lists, the assassinations, the maintenance of Guantanamo – spotlighted a web of IT and defence providers with ambitions no less extensive than those mainstays of global consumerism, McDonalds and Coca-Cola. The 'War on Terror' was not just a racket; it was shaping up to be the ultimate 'corporate' racket.

For these reasons, the Snowden story represented for Stone much more than a tale of a plucky, Capraesque whistle-blower who had succeeded in exposing the administration's duplicity on matters of national security. Snowden's story was, quite simply, a narrative that drew on everything that Stone had been talking about for ten years, and tapped into a deeper sensibility that had been with him since *Salvador*, if not before, in those dark days as a young man in Vietnam.

Notes

- 1 Interview with Oliver Stone, Santa Monica, CA, 19 January 2010.
- 2 Alessandra Stanley, 'A Noted Filmmaker in a Tense Land', *International New York Times* (5 June 2003). Available at <http://nytimes.com/2003/06/05/movies/television-review-a-noted-filmmaker-in-a-tense-land.html> (accessed 7 December 2015).
- 3 Mark Caro, 'In "Looking for Fidel," Stone asks the right questions', *Chicago Tribune* (14 April 2004). Available at http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2004-04-14/features/0404140066_1_castro-fidel-dissidents (accessed 7 December 2015).
- 4 Interview with Oliver Stone, Santa Monica, CA, 19 January 2010.
- 5 The White House, 'Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People' (20 September 2001). Available at <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html> (accessed 7 December 2015).
- 6 Marc Cooper, 'Playboy Interview: Oliver Stone' in Charles Silet (ed), *Oliver Stone Interviews* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), pp. 59–90.
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