

that after the Geneva Convention, northern policy evolved in stages: rebuilding the North, supporting the southern revolution against Diem, and bringing military and diplomatic pressure against the Americans. In his study of the South, Ngo Vinh Long examines the key role that southern insurgents played in capitalizing on the political and military failures of the Saigon government. Two essays on the United States follow and demonstrate that American decisions in Vietnam were affected by developments in the cold war and, after 1965, by the growing antiwar movement.

Essays on the international scope of the war, which comprise the second-half of the book, begin with the Soviet Union and China. Fearful of a war with the United States, both countries avoided combat and limited their role to supplying military and financial aid to North Vietnam. Their support emerged from their experiences in Korea and their cold war desire to support a communist ally; it assumed added propaganda significance for each nation after the Sino-Soviet split. Australia joined with the Americans and sent troops to Southeast Asia in order to block Communist expansion, make use of its military, and prove themselves a staunch western ally. A final essay on European nations focuses mostly on Great Britain.

The essays on Vietnam and the United States provide students with an excellent analysis of why the war took the course that it did. The essays on the other countries, however, add little to a student's understanding of the war beyond defining the magnitude of communist support of the North. Indeed, as important as it might be, the book does not make it clear why an international perspective on the Vietnam War is even relevant. China, the Soviet Union, and other European nations stayed out of the conflict, apparently viewing it as a sideshow to more pressing matters, and Australia's 50,000 soldiers had little effect on the war's outcome. Instead of the international focus, essays on the French or, especially, the Vietnamese who supported a separate state in the South would have been more valuable. Also, because each essay covers its separate topic through 1975, the book, taken as a whole, seems incompatible with a semester-long chronological study of the Vietnam War. It might be better suited to a course on modern diplomatic history for showing how big nations twist small conflicts to their own purposes.

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**Robert Brent Toplin, ed. *Oliver Stone's U.S.A.: Film, History, and Controversy*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000. Pp. 304. Cloth \$34.95; ISBN 0-7006-1035-9.**

Oliver Stone, more consistently than any other director, has presented moviegoers, film critics, and historians—amateur and professional—with radical and challenging perspectives on pivotal events and themes in post-World War II American

history. Avowedly not a "cinematic historian," a point Stone makes several times in this edited volume of essays about his work, he is intent on setting the record straight about the role of history in his films. As an historical dramatist, the films, he writes, are "fiction ... based on a combination of research, intuition, and my private conscience." This essay collection about the work of one of America's most talented, controversial, and public filmmakers reveals a longstanding tension between Stone and his critics, but in doing so allows important questions to be raised about his movies and their relationship to controversial events in recent American history.

In Robert A. Rosenstone's introductory essay, "Oliver Stone as Historian," the author suggests that the director's films prompt important questions: "What sort of historical world does film construct?" "How does it construct that world?" and "What does that historical construct mean to us?" Excellent questions to be sure, ones that will prompt good discussion in upper-division and graduate courses, but neither Rosenstone nor most of the other professional historians ever get to the heart of the first two questions, and only Jack E. Davis, Le Ly Hayslip, and George McGovern even begin to get at the third question. Instead, many of the critics miss a great deal of what Stone's movies accomplish. As editor Toplin points out in his introduction, Stone's films have a political and social punch that allows the public to continue talking about important events in American history and, as was the case with *JFK*, agitate for openness in government and society.

Several of the authors single out Stone's use of conspiracy as a major theme in his movies, implying that his understanding of history is naive or even dangerous. Stone's defense of his films and view of history is strong, articulate, informed, and, at times, inspiring. Toplin should be commended for giving Stone one-third of the book to respond to his critics. But it is Jack Davis's and Le Ly Hayslip's essays that address the most important contribution Stone makes to American history: the inclusion of marginalized and silenced minorities and events, what Davis calls "history from the bottom up." As part of a wider concern in new left historicism to include "contemporary issues, sensitive ones that moviemakers—and historians—had traditionally swept under the rug of silence," Davis suggests Stone's films play an important role in setting the record straight. Like historians Howard Zinn, whom Stone quotes, Stephen J. Whitfield, and Ronald Takaki, Stone can be understood as filling in the gaps in the American story. In calling Stone on the carpet for the simplification of complex events and ideas and for omitting important details and/or connections, conservative historians neglect the fact that they do these things as well. Davis asks: "Has anyone read a survey history textbook lately?"

One of the volume's major oversights is the omission of an essay on *Talk Radio*. In a book on controversy and history, how can this film be overlooked? In several of the essays, the writers indicate, both directly and indirectly, that they are worried about how the audience at large responds to Stone's movies. What understanding or, more appropriately, what misunderstanding about America's past,

will most viewers of *JFK*, *Nixon*, or *Wall Street* walk away with? It seems to me that a large part of *Talk Radio* is less about First Amendment rights and conspiracy theories (what most of Stone's critics spend their time arguing about) than about what (mis)understanding people have of important historical events like the Holocaust. When Eric Bogosian's shock jock character in the film asks/shouts at his listeners "What's wrong with you people!?" he is, in effect, asking the question that underlies most critics' fears about the effect of Stone's film on moviegoers: "What's wrong with your understanding of history?" So, is the emphasis on Stone's ideology misplaced? Should we, instead, be writing less about the dubious relationship between film(maker) and audience and more about historical understanding? This is a point Stone seems to pose: Is the difference between history and art all that great? Isn't history, like art, really about meaning? If so, then film, like poetry and song, can enable history to come closer to the world as it is lived rather than scientific rationalist claims to objectivity. What Henri Bergson once said about painting, Jim Morrison once said about film: It is "the closest approximation in art form that we have to the actual flow of consciousness." *Oliver Stone's U.S.A.* opens the door for an important discussion on the interrelationships between myth, fact, and truth.

*Oliver Stone's U.S.A.* is a fine collection of essays that could enhance many different types of courses, but since the essays rely upon extensive knowledge of a single director, his films, and their relation to the study and presentation of American history, this book is best suited for an upper-division and/or graduate film and American history class or a class in post-World War II American history. It could also be a great tool for a popular culture and American history course as well. The level of sophistication in the essays is accessible and variable, making it easy for an instructor and/or class to pick and choose which ideas they will grapple with. Toplin includes a selected bibliography including both printed and audiovisual material that will be of help to any reader interested in further study.

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**Larry Madaras & James M. SoRelle, eds.** *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in American History*. Vol. II: *Reconstruction to the Present*. Guilford, CT: Dushkin/McGraw Hill, 2000. Eighth edition. Pp. xviii, 410. Paper, \$19.95; ISBN 0-07-303162-3.

Whenever a text reaches its eighth edition, one must assume that the editors are doing something right. Such is the case with *Taking Sides*. The editors have tried to strike that ever-elusive balance between social, diplomatic, and political history. They have accomplished this goal as well as anyone else.