

# Oliver Stone

The film director Oliver Stone has once again ruffled feathers with a controversial television series that justifies those like me who think that, despite the 75% of corrosive, banal rubbish that appears on television, every now and again an important educational documentary makes having access to it worthwhile. The iconic British series "The World at War" directed by Jeremy Isaacs, which aired between 1973 and 1974, was and remains an essential tool in understanding the history of World War II. It was as balanced and objective as it is ever possible to be. Oliver Stone's miniseries called "The Untold History of the United States" is in no way balanced or objective. But it is stimulating and thought provoking, and I highly recommend it, however much I may personally dislike many of Stone's biases, especially with regard to Jews and Israel.

According to Stone, Hitler only lost because Russia stopped him and prevented him reaching the oil fields of Baku. America finished him off. Most of Britain's tactical decisions were disastrous and only the Channel saved it. Roosevelt pulled the rug from under the Imperialist British Empire he hated. But then it was Truman and Eisenhower who initiated an era of American empire-building and imperialism that Stone thinks is still in place.

Truman might not have been the most charismatic or able of presidents and his nomination as vice president was indeed an example of dirty, backroom conniving to block the incumbent vice president, the radical charismatic Henry Wallace. But he was responsible for the Marshall Plan that rebuilt much of Europe. If nothing else, we Jews applaud his decision, however reluctant, to support the UN vote for Israel as a state in 1947. The only person Stone blames more for the cold war than Truman was Winston Churchill. This no doubt explains why President Obama returned the Churchill bust that had decorated the Oval Office to the UK.

As a child growing up in postwar Britain, I was fully aware of how much anti-American feeling 'the bomb' generated. Yet the atomic deterrent led to the longest period free of war that Europe experienced since before the arrival of the Vikings. I recall that during the fifties the European anti-Americans used to joke that America learnt three things from its most recent presidents. From Roosevelt it learnt that you could be president until you died, from Truman that anybody could become president, and from Eisenhower that you could manage without a president. The joke, of course, was on the Old World as it stumbled and fumbled towards decline.

Nevertheless, history is so engrossing precisely because there are so many different ways of recording the facts, analyzing them and drawing conclusions about them. As Isaiah Berlin said, one should always beware of people who claim they are in possession of the one and only certainty. One of the most influential books in my life was "Napoleon: For and Against", by Pieter Geyl. As a schoolboy it taught me that every person, every situation can be seen through positive lenses and negative ones. Not to mention Jewish ones. Whatever else one might think of Napoleon, wherever he conquered in Europe

Jews were given civil rights. And when he was defeated they were taken away. Can we agree that Ben Gurion was a better Prime Minister than Menachem or whether JFK did more for civil rights than Lyndon Johnson? No, we can't and never will, because we each have our own specific perspectives and priorities. What's more, we may never know the full story. Did Napoleon lose the battle of Waterloo because of weather conditions, rivalry between his generals, a tiff with Josephine, or a bad night's sleep? New information becomes accessible and hind sight is a great revisionist.

Was Oslo wrong? Was Israel right to leave Gaza? Or the current ceasefire in Gaza, will it prove to be good or bad for Hamas, and will it weaken Fatah? Did it encourage Morsi to overreach himself? Will the success of the Iron Dome lead to a complete rethink of Iranian and Hezbollah strategy? Was this a trial run for an attack on Iran or might the Ayatollahs think again? Did Netanyahu gain new commitments from America? We will also have the cranks who will tell us it was all the hand of an unseen power. But which one? The Jewish or the Muslim?

We don't know for certain. Each one of us sees, decides, and thinks within our own parameters, and no one has the complete story or the complete picture. Every treaty there has ever been has had its unwritten side deals. Academics and experts always argue about what happened and what the consequences were, and that is precisely why the Oliver Stones of the world flourish, and rightly so.

We do know that if we want to survive we need to ensure that our intelligence is reliable. Our defenses are secure. Our people are prepared and our morale and sense of what we are fighting for is primed and sure. But too often Israel has made the wrong decision. After 1967 good will was squandered. The Yom Kipur War nearly ended in disaster because of faulty intelligence, and so did two wars in Lebanon. Most of Israel's top army brass opposed spending money on the Iron Dome. We need the wisdom to evaluate and to negotiate, to see beyond our noses, and to prepare for the next stage not just the present one. That is as true of our personal lives, our professional lives, as well as our spiritual ones.

What is the greatest quality that wise leaders need? To see what is already happening under their very noses. Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai lived at a time of crisis, when the Romans crushed the Jewish resistance and ended the Second Jewish State. He asked this very question. Rebbi Shimon answered in Avot 2:9, "He who can see what is born (and is going to happen)." I don't know which is worse, an ostrich which refuses to see or a mad dog that makes all the wrong decisions. Either way, wise leaders value criticism.