

Stone says no malice intended in 'W'

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Reuters, Los Angeles - Oliver Stone's film portrait of President George W. Bush was always going to be controversial given the director's liberal leanings. So Stone decided to open "W." in U.S. theaters less than three weeks before Americans select their next president -- a calculated move aimed at prodding voters to think about the past eight years and the future.

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The movie is part drama, part satire, yet the director of "JFK" and "Nixon" argues it is no hatchet job on Bush -- and so far, critics agree. The final verdict awaits the October 17 debut for one of this fall's most widely anticipated films.

"Whoever wins this election, Bush's impact has changed the world," Stone told Reuters. "This man has left us with three wars -- in Iraq, Afghanistan and the war on terror -- and the legacy of the pre-emptive strike.

"These are legacies that will haunt his successor for years. It's good for people, before the election, to think about who they elected eight years ago and about where we are as a country right now," the three-time Oscar winner said.

With Josh Brolin in the title role, "W." is a rare movie about a sitting U.S. president, made by a director whose past films have been criticized for mixing fact and fiction.

Yet Stone says audiences will not find the partisan portrait his critics might expect from the director of Vietnam war film "Platoon" and Cuban documentary "Looking for Fidel."

"It was not our intention to bring malice or judgment on George W. Bush and his administration. He and his administration clearly speak for themselves," Stone said.

"EVEN-HANDED"

Among early reviews, show business paper Daily Variety says the movie is a "clear and plausible take on (Bush's) psychological makeup, and, considering Stone's reputation and Bush's vast unpopularity, a relatively even-handed, restrained treatment of recent politics."

"W." traces Bush's transformation from a privileged, hard-drinking frat boy to religious convert; his rise from Texas governor to U.S. president; and to his decisions in the weeks ahead of the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Based on books written by former White House insiders, the filmmakers say "W." is intended to ask questions about "a life underestimated" -- to borrow a famous "Bushism."

Bush spokeswoman Dana Perino said the White House had "much more important things to do than comment on this ridiculous movie." Yet, Stone said he and screenwriter Stanley Weiser had "parked their politics at the door."

"The movie tries to understand Bush and make him a human being," Stone said. "I have tried to be fair and balanced. I have tried not to take sides."

Stone makes Bush's relationship with his father, former President George H.W. Bush, the dramatic centerpiece of "W."

The film highlights Bush's youth as the "black sheep" of the Bush dynasty and it reconstructs his meetings with political and military advisers before the 2003 Iraq invasion. The Iraq issue provides much of the movie's satire. Bush likens new rules on torture in "Guantanamo" to his college fraternity initiation.

Brolin, who captures the swagger and charm of Bush, said he had initial doubts about taking on the role but on reading the script, he was moved and saddened. He decided it was "the greatest challenge an actor can ever have."

"Bush is an exaggerated personality ... We tried to create a drama with the reality of those exaggerations but I don't think it is bufoonery," Brolin said.