



## TEACHERS' NOTES

The aim of this study guide is to suggest ways in which the teacher can make OLIVER STONE'S 'Nixon' accessible to students of History, English and Politics at Key Stage 4 and A' level, It is also appropriate for students undertaking General Studies.

## SYNOPSIS

he guide examines some of the background to the film and the issues that arise when the filmmaker

interprets real lives and events for the screen. Although he is one of the most chronicled public figures of the 20th century, RICHARD MILHOUS NIXON remains an enigma to many, his decisions, motives and behaviour often shrouded in mystery. 'Nixon is a dramatised attempt to understand the man behind the tarnished presidential seal, who, to paraphrase his own words, scaled life's

greatest heights and plunged into it deepest valleys. 'Nixon' tells the extraordinary personal story of America's controversial 37th President: a man whose lifelong quest for public acceptance through political power constantly eluded him...even when he held the highest office in the nation.

'Nixon', dir Oliver Stone. Certificate: 15. Running time: 3 hrs 12 mins. UK release date: 15th March 1996

'What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?'

MATTHEW 16:26

QUOTED AT START OF 'NIXON'

## INTRODUCTION



Nixon on Republican Campaign Tour during a visit to Chatanooga, Tennessee. 1968.

© MAGNUM Pictures

**'Without risks you will suffer no defeats. But without risks you will win no victories. You must never be satisfied with success, and you should never be discouraged by failure.'**

**NIXON FROM 'IN THE ARENA', 1990**

Nixon: 'Death is no Excuse'

LAPEL BADGE ON SALE IN USA, 1996

RICHARD MILHOUS NIXON was elected to the House of Representatives in 1946 and to the Senate in 1950. From 1953 until 1960 he was Vice-President, failing by the narrowest of margins against Kennedy to become President in 1960. After losing the California gubernatorial race in 1962 it was thought that his career was finished. Yet, by 1969 he had become the 37th President and was re-elected by an enormous margin of votes in November 1972. It had been a lifetime of truly remarkable achievement but by the following year every facet of Nixon's life - public, private, political, personal and financial - was under investigation and being derided and denigrated.

OLIVER STONE'S revisionist biographical film, 'NIXON', examines how RICHARD NIXON rose to such incredible heights before falling with the inevitability of a Tragic Hero. It is an extraordinary tale.

In 'NIXON' Stone has been careful, at first sight, to adhere to the well-known record of Nixon's life, his flaws, hubris, lies and schemes. Stone's earlier film, 'JFK', was criticised by historians as not being substantiated by historical proof. The script of 'NIXON' has been annotated by its authors, citing over 80 molar historical sources. It would appear that Stone has cast himself not merely as director but also as documentor and archivist, going to great pains to ensure the film's veracity. As historians there are several questions we should bear in mind when watching 'NIXON':

- What is the process that has converted the raw material of Nixon's life (the primary evidence) to the finished film (the secondary source)?
- How selective has Stone been in his use of source material?
- What weight and importance is given to various incidents, policies, sources and conflicts, and why?
- What are Stone's motives in making the film? How objective is he?
- How much is fact and how much is opinion?

'NIXON' is undoubtedly a valuable secondary source, It opens up discussion on how sources give us ideas about the past and how a wide range of evidence can be used to construct a secondary account in the format of film. It provides an insight into the power struggles within the American political system. It reveals the importance and gravity of Vietnam and Watergate to the American political consciousness. It chronologically charts major events in 20th century American history - the California pioneers, the Depression, World War Two, the Cold War, Vietnam, the peace movement, the Sino-Soviet split and the Watergate affair. As an epic study of a central character 'Nixon' is a powerful biographical piece: the story of a melancholy, lonely man; frightened by intimacy, awkward in society, resentful, jealous, tough, driven by a lust for power and a ruthless pursuit of greatness.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

"To Richard:

You have gone far and we are proud of you always - I know that you will keep your relationship with your maker as it should be for after all that, as you must know, is the most important thing in this life."

LETTER FROM HANNAH NIXON WRITTEN ON THE NIGHT OF HER SON'S INAUGURATION AS VICE-PRESIDENT, 20 JANUARY 1953.

'NIXON' is 3 hours 12 minutes long, covering a sixty year time span: there is a certain amount of preparatory work to be done prior to watching the film.

## **CHRONOLOGY**

"Struggle is what gives life meaning".

FRANK, NIXON'S FATHER, IN 'NIXON'

The time line provides a useful framework of the events which influenced and impacted upon Nixon's life. Not all of these are covered in the film; is this selectivity for commercial or political means, due to the constraints of time or the medium, or for other reasons?

## NIXON TIME LINE

- 9Jan 1913 RICHARD MILHOUS NIXON born in Yorba Linda, California.
- 1930 Start of worldwide depression.
- 1933 Harold Nixon dies, one of Nixon's two brothers to die of tuberculosis.
- 1937 Graduates in law at Duke University Law School. Gets job in Whittier's law firm.
- 1938 Meets Pat Ryan at amateur dramatics society.
- 1939 World War Two begins.
- 1940 Marries Pat Ryan.
- Dec 1941 Bombing by Japanese of Pearl Harbour.
- Aug 1942 Nixon gets a commission in the navy. Sent to Naval Indoctrination School at Quonset Point, Rhode Island.
- July 1944 End of Nixon's war service in South Pacific.
- 1945 Germany surrenders. USA drops atom bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.
- 1946 Churchill makes famous 'Iron Curtain' speech in Fulton, Missouri: has profound effect on Nixon.
- 1947 Nixon chosen for Congressman Herter's select committee to prepare a report in readiness for Marshall Aid, the biggest foreign aid programme in history.
- Aug 1948 The Hiss Case enhances Nixon's career and image. Hiss served in a number of posts under Roosevelt and was primary architect of the U.N. Nixon proves him guilty of Communist allegiances when on McCarthy's House Committee on Un-American Activities. Hiss imprisoned for perjury.
- 1950 Nixon elected as California's senator after telling electorate to choose between 'freedom or state socialism'. US troops sent to Korea.
- 1952 Nixon becomes Eisenhower's Vice-President.
- 'Fund Crisis' begins - rumours circulate that Nixon's campaign was bankrolled by a 'slushfund' supplied by Californian businessmen. Amid calls for resignation, Nixon delivers the notorious 'Checkers Speech' - crudely sentimental but highly effective, presenting himself as a dedicated family man and explaining his finances. Nixon congratulated by Eisenhower.
- 1953 End of Korean War. Dwight D. Eisenhower elected President by a huge landslide vote.
- 1954 Vietnam divided into two.
- 1957 McCarthy dies.
- 1959 Fidel Castro leads revolution in Cuba.
- 1960 Nixon stands against Kennedy for presidency but loses by narrow margin.
- 1961 Nixon 'retires' from politics and joins a Los Angeles law firm. 'Bay of Pigs' fiasco.
- 1962 Nixon loses election for Governor of California. Tells press that 'this is my last press conference'.
- 22
- Nov 1963 Kennedy assassinated in Dallas.
- 1964 U.S. starts full scale bombing of Vietnam.
- 1965 U.S. troops sent to Vietnam

- 20
- Jan 1969 Nixon inaugurated as 37th President of The United States having defeated Democrat Hubert Humphrey.
- 1970 Nixon steps up bombing of North Vietnam
- 8May
- 1970 Nixon meets peace protesters in middle of-the-night walkabout at the Lincoln Memorial.
- 1971 Nixon supports China's entry to the U.N.
- 12 June
- 1971 Tricia Nixon marries Ed Cox.
- 13 June
- 1971 New York Times begins to publish the Pentagon Papers - the most serious leak of classified secret material in the history of the United States, aiming at discrediting Nixon's current policies in Vietnam. Daniel Ellsberg indicted on one count of unauthorised possession of documents relating to national defence. Nixon believes wider conspiracy at work and Egil 'Bud' Krogh heads the leak project with Young, Hunt and Liddy (the 'plumbers'). Their job: to plug leaks. They break into Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office in an attempt to get information on Ellsberg. Plumbers disband in September, Nixon denies involvement.
- Feb 1972 Nixon meets Mao Tse Tung in Peking.
- May 1972 Nixon meets Brezhnev in Moscow. SALT 1 agreement signed.
- 17 June
- 1972 Watergate break-in arrests.
- 7 Nov
- 1972 Nixon re-elected as President with huge majority, defeating George McGovern.
- May 1973 Senator Ervin heads special committee to investigate the 1972 election campaign. American troops withdraw from Vietnam.
- July 1973 Testimony of Alexander Butterfield, a Haldeman aide, reveals the existence of a secret taping system in the Oval Office of the White House. Over the next few months Nixon reluctantly hands over some of the tapes, including the 'smoking gun' tape in which Nixon discusses the break-in and cover-up with Haldeman.
- 8 Aug
- 1974 Nixon becomes the only President to deliver a resignation speech.
- 1975 Presidential pardon issued by Gerald Ford to Nixon.
- 14 Apr
- 1994 Nixon dies aged 81, his sins apparently forgiven if not forgotten.



# THE PLAYERS

## KEY PLAYERS IN 'NIXON'

Character	Name of Actor/Actress	Key Role
John Dean	David Hyde Pierce to the President, resigned 1973.	Counsel (adviser)
John Ehrlichman	J.T. Walsh	Assistant to the President on domestic affairs, resigned 1973.
Alexander Hay	Powers Booth	Ex-Generai appointed Chief of Staff after Watergate resignations
H.R. Haldeman	James Woods	Loyal assistant to the President, White House Chief of Staff, resigned 1973.
J. Edgar Hoover	Bob Hoskins	Head of the F.B.I.
Howard Hunt	Ed Harris	Ex C.I.A. agent, one of the 'plumbers', Watergate defendant
Henry Kissinger	Paul Sorriano	Secretary of State
John Mitchell	E.G. Marshall	Campaign director to re-elect President; Attorney General
Martha Mitchell	Madeline Kahn	John Mitchell's wife.
Hannah Nixon	Mary Steenburgen	President's mother.

Pat Nixon	Joan Allen	President's Wife
Nelson Rockefeller	Edward Hermann	Republican candidate defeated by Nixon in 1968; Kissinger's patron before that date
Ron Ziegler	David Paymer	Press Secretary

## MINOR CHARACTERS IN 'NIXON'

Name of Character Role

Dwight Chapin	Nixon's appointments secretary and key aide.
Chuck Colson	Close aide to the President. Some of the Watergate burglars were Cubans.
Richard Helms	Director of the C.I.A. in 1972,
Ed 'Bud' Krogh	Head of the 'Leak Project' Ehrlichman's assistant.
Gordon Liddy	Shady character, general counsellor to Magruder, Watergate defendant.
Jeb Magruder	Deputy Chief of campaign to re-elect the President

## UNDERSTANDING THE U.S. POLITICAL SYSTEM

"Strength in this life, happiness in the next."  
Hannah Nixon's Mother in 'NIXON'.

In 1787 a Convention of the so called 'Founding Fathers' was held in Philadelphia. They wanted to guarantee the individual's right to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' following the War of Independence. The diagram on page 6 summarises their decision, it also provides the basis of the U.S. Constitution. Federal powers, as you can see, are divided threefold so that each provides checks and balances against the others. The constitution stated what Federal Government can do.

It is worth considering the supremacy of the constitution of the U.S., bearing in mind its central theme of freedom - to express opinions, to move west, to trade and manufacture; in sum, freedom from the influence of government. Liberty was a key desire for the early colonists.

- How was Nixon's power checked?
- Why was the Supreme Court not elected like the rest of government?
- How could the Supreme Court demand that Nixon, "the most powerful man in the world", hand over the tapes?
- Did Nixon behave like a sovereign who could break laws?

## LEGISLATIVE ASPECT

### Congress

1. THE SENATE: two members from each State elected for six years.
2. THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES: Number of members depends on the size of the population, elected for two years.

### Functions

- Taxation.
- Decisions on war and peace
- Enacts laws.
- Acceptance or rejection of Presidential policies

## EXECUTIVE ASPECT

### President

elected for four years. Can only serve a maximum of two terms.

### Vice - President

also elected

Secretaries to all important Federal government departments (and some other offices) are appointed by the President.

### Functions

- To formulate molar policies.
- Choose Chiefs of Staff/Secretaries of State
- Enforce laws.
- Run the government on day-to-day basis

## JUDICIAL ASPECT

### Supreme Court

- Independent of State control
- Justices nominated by President and confirmed by Senate.

### Functions

- Interpretation of laws.
- Uphold the constitution in the light of laws passed by Congress.

## THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN OF 1960

"It was TV more than anything else that turned the tide."  
J.F. KENNEDY, 12 NOVEMBER 1960

The campaign for Presidency began in the autumn of 1960. Nixon was an experienced politician and benefited from the support of big business; he seemed also to be the choice of the majority of the middle class, farmers and the towns of the mid-West.

JOHN FITZGERALD KENNEDY, the Democrat candidate, was young, rich, stylish and good-looking; he had the support of the trade unions, Irish-Americans and many black people. Though a Senator, he was not as experienced as Nixon.

Kennedy's victory in this campaign, which embitters Nixon throughout the rest of the film to a point of near self-destruction, benefited from a series of television debates. One such debate is an important scene in 'Nixon'.

- How does the scene portray the power of the medium of television?
- How far is the image of Nixon that his campaign team wish to portray from the reality in the film?
- How was the poor impression of Nixon influenced by his appearance, his illness, his choice of suit, his lack of soundbites?
- How easy is it to manipulate the media?

A survey by Dr Elinor Roper estimated that two million of Kennedy's votes resulted from the impact of the television debates. Kennedy won by only 112,000 votes.

### TRACK TWO

"Was it one of the nuts?"

NIXON TO J. EDGAR HOOVER AFTER KENNEDY'S  
DEATH IN 'NIXON'

A controversial aspect throughout 'NIXON' are the periodic references made to 'TRACK TWO' - a plot to assassinate FIDEL CASTRO by the White House and the C.I.A. Track One was a parallel plan - a simultaneous invasion into Cuba to lead an anti-Castro revolution by C.I.A. trained troops. There were at least eight failed attempts at Track Two, including giving Castro an exploding cigar! Track



Nixon's references to the Bay of Pigs, Haldeman has speculated, was Nixon's code word for the Kennedy assassination.

Stone's 'Nixon' does not imply that Nixon played any part in Track Two activities after he was defeated by Kennedy in 1960. There is a key scene in which Southern businessmen and Cubans darkly hint to Nixon that President Kennedy may not be as invulnerable as he seems, though Nixon resists their pressure. Nixon was in Dallas the day Kennedy was assassinated but left before it happened and there is a suggestion that he suspected the work of extremist right-wingers, or 'nuts' as he called them.

- Nixon saw his brothers Harold and Arthur die of tuberculosis, and undoubtedly benefited from the deaths of J.F. Kennedy and his brother Robert Kennedy (a formidable Democrat opponent): does Stone believe that Nixon suffered from 'survivor's guilt'?

## VIETNAM

"Where would we be without death?"  
NIXON TO A PORTRAIT OF LINCOLN IN 'NIXON'

"You can't stop it, can you? Even if you wanted to. Because it is not you. It's the system. And the system won't let you stop it."  
FEMALE STUDENT TO NIXON IN 'NIXON', AT LINCOLN MEMORIAL.

After the French colonialists had been beaten in South-East Asia in 1954, the USA became a powerful presence in the area by providing economic and military aid to non-Communist South Vietnam. They also organised a military alliance they called the SOUTH-EAST TREATY ORGANISATION.

It is impossible to underestimate the profound influence Vietnam has had in America and its media after the build-up of American air and ground forces since 1964. PRESIDENT JOHNSON, whose administration justified the war according to the 'domino theory' (i.e. one country influencing those juxtaposed to 'fall' to Communism) claimed that military action was the first step before economic recovery in the area. By 1968 the opposition peace movement was so widespread that Johnson decided not to stand for reelection, whilst more than half a million young American troops found themselves embroiled in a guerrilla war against the Vietcong and HoChi Minh's Communist North Vietnam.

- Vietnam was the first war to be 'televised' - how might this alter public opinion?
- Nixon sought 'Peace with honour'. Do you agree?
- What was Henry Kissinger's role in the negotiations for peace?
- How does Nixon respond in the film to the peace protesters in his late night 'walkabout' at the Lincoln memorial?



- Consider the U.S. constitution. The U.S. went to immense lengths of bloodshed and destruction to prevent people choosing to be Communist. How does this compare with freedom and independence for all?
- Oliver Stone received a Purple Heart and the Bronze Star for his service in Vietnam. He was wounded twice. How might his experiences have influenced his direction of the film?

## **WATERGATE**

"It's the lie that gets you!" It's the cover up ...not the deed that's really' bad here..."  
NIXON IN 'NIXON'.

The ill-fated 1972 WATERGATE break-in provides a focus for the whole 'Nixon' film.

At 2.30am on the morning of 17 June 1972, five men were arrested at the Democrat Party's National Committee headquarters at the Watergate office complex in Washington DC. The men had large sums of money on them, bugging equipment and walkie-talkies, but at the time the incident aroused little interest as the November 1972 presidential election was under way.

The money, it transpired, was part of a secret, illegal fund to help Nixon be re-elected. It had been partly used to pay GEORGE LIDDY and HOWARD HUNT to organise the break-in. Over the next ten months the burglars were paid nearly half a million dollars to conceal their connection with the White House.

On 30 April 1972, Nixon, in a notional television broadcast, denied any knowledge about the break-in which had been linked to him by two journalists, Woodward and Bernstein, via a source only known to this day as 'Deep Throat',

The subsequent scandal which resulted was contained by the cover-up activities of Nixon's personal White House staff until after Nixon was re-elected in November 1972.

In March 1973 Haldeman was forced to resign, later followed by Mitchell, Dean, Ehrlichman, In May 1973 it became clear that all the President's men were involved.

The breakthrough occurred when the investigating Senate Committee discovered that Nixon taped all his conversations in the White House Oval Office. Nixon's motive for doing this was his extreme self-consciousness about his own future place in history and the necessity for an accurate legacy. In spite of the Senate's demands Nixon initially refused to hand over the tapes. When he eventually complied under a Supreme Court order, included in the collection was the so-called 'smoking gun' tape, in which Nixon is heard discussing the break-in and cover-up with Haldeman in June 1972.

Nixon had lied to the American people and shown himself to be isolated from, and suspicious of, the outside world to an almost abnormal degree. The House of Representatives seemed certain to vote for Impeachment, which would lead to the President being dismissed from office and put on trial. In advance of this, Nixon resigned, his poll rating at an all-time low and his credibility totally undermined.

- What does Stone suggest might have been on the 18-and-a-half minutes of wiped out tape?

- What are the dangers of relying solely on Stone's account of Watergate?
- How does Stone consolidate Nixon's reputation as 'Tricky Dicky'?
- To what extent does the Watergate scandal confirm Stone's assertion that 'Nixon' is about "the illusion of power"?
- At this time Nixon was suffering from viral pneumonia. How does the sequence in the film of flashbacks and images as he hallucinates convey the moment of his political death? Is it effective?

## 'NIXON' NOT NIXON

"I thought the time was right for a serious examination of this extraordinary man."  
STONE ON 'NIXON'

## THE MAKING OF THE FILM

OLIVER STONE directed, part wrote and part produced 'NIXON'. What was it that attracted Stone to dramatise the story of one of the most chronicled public figures of the 20th century?

Stone calls Nixon "one of the most fascinating and frustrating figures of 20th century American history... It's almost as if he embodies everything that's right and wrong about America in general and American politicians in particular. There's no question that he was brilliant, but he used it for less than noble ends." In this respect 'NIXON' fits snugly into the catalogue of Stone's other left-wing polemical films - 'SALVADOR', 'BORN ON THE FOURTH OF JULY', 'PLATOON' and others.

- What is Stone's agenda in making this film? Is it fulfilled?
- Some critics have argued that Stone, by showing 'Nixon' as a pathetic snivelling, powerless creature overwhelmed by the forces government office has reinforced the real life Nixon's image as that 'U playing the victim. Do you agree?

The director and his team went to great lengths to bring to life a large slice of American history and characters who are still very much in the public mind and imagination (many are still alive).

ANTHONY HOPKINS, as Nixon, studied books, film and video tapes to capture Nixon's mannerisms, voice, posture and gestures. Make-up artists gave Hopkins a hairpiece, Nixon-esque upper teeth, brown contact lenses and more prominent eyebrows. Over 5,000 costumes were designed to add to historical accuracy, covering a 60-year-long stretch of styles and fashions for men and women. Sets were designed of the Oval Office and the Lincoln memorial interior sanctuary was, for example, created out of styrofoam. The residential wing set of a contemporary film, 'The American President' was adapted according to historical detail. Computerised composites for 'Nixon' enabled Stone to place Hopkins in the same frame as actual historical people.

- Why do you think Stone went to such elaborate lengths to create historically accurate sets, clothes, events and people?

- What are the limitations imposed on Stone when he produces history through a feature film?
- History is about know/edge, skills (purposeful evaluation of information) and understanding (making sense of the information): does 'Nixon' teach us about the history of the period it covers? What does it not tell us? To what extent is it 'fiction'?
- "The camera never lies." How does Stone contradict this?
- How does Stone use colour/monochrome/different film grains/camera styles/archive material/music and to what effect?
- Has Hopkins' portrayal of Nixon avoided caricature?
- Do others, for example Hoskins as Hoover, avoid caricature?
- What are the dangers of using well-known faces in minor roles (e.g. Larry Hagman as Jack Jones) and how can they be avoided?

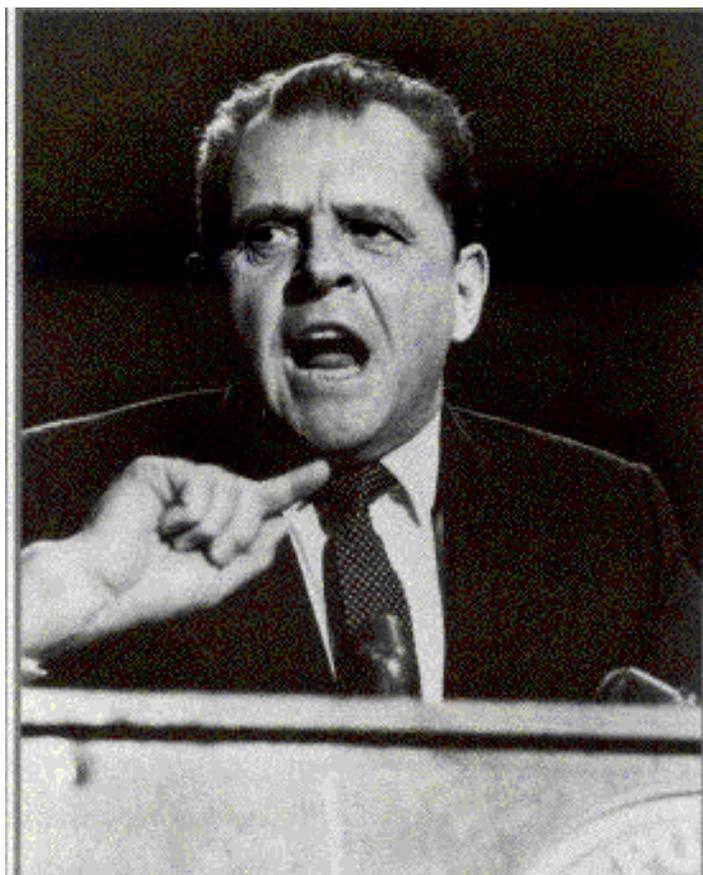


## WATCHING 'NIXON'

It is a dilemma for every teacher when watching a film to ensure that students who are asked to take notes do so without losing the continuity and enjoyment of watching the film itself.

'NIXON' lends itself to selective note-taking. In this way, members of the group could be asked to take notes under only one of a selection of headings and then share their findings with each other to gain a whole picture. Such headings could be evidence in the film of:

- The influence of Nixon's upbringing/mother/deaths of brothers.
- Nixon's strengths/positive achievements.
- Nixon's weaknesses and insecurities.
- Nixon being an anti-Communist reactionary
- Key events.
- Hubris.
- Relationships with close aides/friends/family.
- Significant quotes.
- The struggle to control aggression.
- 'Bullishness'.
- Nixon as a motivator.
- Nixon's oratory skills.



- Nixon's global vision.
- The role of his wife, Pat.
- Stone's methodology.
- Pursuit of power, prestige and status.

'NIXON' can be used to complement source work in History and Politics as well as a character study in English. In Media Studies it is useful in raising questions of how an interpretation of a complicated period of history is put before the cinema-goer as a definitive statement of truth. It could be used as a stimulus to research other powerful figures and how a film treatment might be constructed to convey their lives: Stone himself had researched two other biographical projects on GENERAL MANUEL NORIEGA and EVA PERON before deciding to proceed with 'NIXON',

## FURTHER READING

Frost, David,  
'I gave them a sword: Behind the scenes of the Nixon interviews'. London, Macmillan, 1978.

Kissinger, Henry,  
'The White House years'. London, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, and Michael Joseph, 1979.

Longford, Lord,  
A 'Nixon - A study in extremes of fortune'. London, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1980.

Nixon, Richard,  
'The Memoirs of Richard Nixon'. London, Sidgwick & Jackson, 1978.

Woodward, Bob & Bernstein, Carl  
'All the President's men'. New York, Simon & Schuster, 1974. (Film of the same name )

" I would have preferred to carry through to the finish whatever the personal agony it would have involved... But the interests of the nation must always come before any personal consideration. I regret deeply any injuries that may have been done in the course of the events that led to this decision. I would only say that if some of my judgements were wrong, they were made in what I believed at the time to be the best interests of the nation.'

Extracts from Nixon's resignation speech, 8 August 1974.