

Almost nobody has yet seen Oliver Stone's forthcoming movie about US President George W. Bush, but already it's hugely controversial. A White House spokeswoman has predicted that it will be full of inaccuracies, and says the president plans to ignore it. Right-wing columnists and bloggers have condemned it as a vicious smear. Leaked pages from an early script have been picked apart by the media. Before interviewing Stone, I rewatched several of his darkly brilliant conspiracy films, and once you've marinated for a while in their pervasive sense that unseemly forces are at work in the world, it's hard not to look at the pre-release controversy and wonder: to whose advantage, ultimately, does it accrue? Who's pulling the strings here? Follow the money. Cui bono? Who benefits?

But maybe that's unfair. Stone insists he can't bear the label "controversial" and says he doesn't benefit from it at all. "To be 'Oliver Stone,' whoever that is, is to provoke feelings in people before they've met me," he says with some exasperation, hunched forward in an armchair in his tidy Santa Monica office. "[People say] 'I don't want to work with him — he's controversial!' But I'm not controversial. I make people think, sometimes." Stone sighs. "Maybe making people think is controversial."

Far from being commercially helpful, Stone's reputation for controversy made the film almost impossible to produce: no big American studio would touch it, and funding had to be cobbled together from several European sources. The actor Josh Brolin, who plays Bush, nearly declined for fear of the potential professional repercussions; other cast members took a lot of persuading, too. "Maybe I'm going to get nauseated and never do another movie," Stone says. "Because they're so hard to do! This was so tough, in terms of getting it together, rushing, getting all these people to work for so little in the hope there'd be a profit. I won't say I'm box office poison, because I'm not, but ..." He seems tired. The movie industry, he explains, "is fucked. Really fucked."

Given all this, the surprise is that the film, entitled *W*, doesn't seem to be an anti-Bush tirade. (I saw brief clips and read detailed production notes.) It's strikingly light in tone, bouncing back and forth between the

president's privileged, alcohol-fueled youth and his first term in the White House, up to the invasion of Iraq, which is presented in oedipal terms. Naturally, it's not a flattering portrait: Bush emerges as an angry loafer, oppressed by his father's achievements and his family's sense of honor, at one point drunk-driving his car on to his parents' lawn and challenging his father — "Mr Perfect, Mr War Hero, Mr Fucking God Almighty!" — to a fist-fight. But Brolin's Bush isn't a mocking parody. He's fundamentally human, even likable, as are some of his inner circle, including US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Karl Rove, formerly Bush's chief political adviser, played by the British actors Thandie Newton and Toby Jones. At least in part, *W* — co-written with Stone's collaborator on *Wall Street*, Stanley Weiser — is a good-faith attempt to answer the core question about the president, which Stone frames thus: "How did Bush go from an alcoholic bum to the most powerful figure in the world?" (Hint: Jesus was involved.) It also delivers a frisson, reminiscent of Stephen Frears' film *The Queen* — which Stone cites as an influence — of being a fly on the wall during recent major affairs of state. The cast of *W* was chosen to be "feelalikes," not lookalikes, Stone says, but either way the similarities are sometimes close enough to startle.

Stone admires Bush's sincerity and self-discipline. "He had tremendous personal problems, and I have to give him enormous credit — he did overcome them, through willpower. Whether he solved them is another issue, but he overcame certain states of mind." The movie isn't angry: Stone says he has no anti-Bush anger left. "I went through this hatred that so many of the American people are going through now, but fortunately I got over it. I had all this anger for this loss for our country, a serious eight-year loss, and now I just want to say you've got to laugh, a little bit, about this whole thing. It gets so painful that humor is the only antidote. If you didn't, you'd go bonkers. You'd become a raging lunatic on a blogosphere, writing anti-Bush screeds." Nor is it a conspiracy film, not least because the Bush administration's conspiracies are too well-known. Who needs to go to the cinema to be told that the march to war in Iraq involved lies,

cover-up and misdirection?

*W* will be released in the US on Oct. 17, right before the election. The timing is useful from a marketing point of view, but Stone insists he had other reasons for rushing it out as its protagonist neared the end of his time in office. "We were here for eight years," he says. "And before we say goodbye in January 2009, we have to exorcise the ghost. We voted for this guy — not everyone, true, but we had him as president: he represents more than just Bush Jr. He represents a mindset of American history."

The early lives of Oliver Stone and George Bush overlapped in several curious ways. They were born within three months of each other, to privileged families; both spent part of their childhood in wealthy Connecticut towns. (Stone's parents divorced as a result of the serial infidelities of his father, a stockbroker.) They both arrived at Yale University in 1964. But then their paths diverged: Bush completed his degree, then spent five years avoiding the Vietnam war with his famously lackadaisical service in the Texas and Alabama Air National Guard. Stone dropped out of Yale twice, and ended up volunteering for Vietnam, where he specifically requested combat duty and was twice wounded in action. His wartime experiences earned him a Purple Heart, and led directly to his unflinching Vietnam films — *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July*, both Oscar winners, and *Heaven and Earth*.

"Bush is the [kind of] Yale boy that's completely different from me," says Stone. "I had a thirst for the world. I wanted to go to Vietnam, I wanted to see the world. Africa. This guy went the other way. He stayed inside the entitlement, he operated very provincially, he stays at home. The National Guard was really about staying at home, too — not just not going to Vietnam, but staying at home."

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*They were born just months apart, studied together at Yale University, then their lives diverged — Oliver Stone went on to fight in Vietnam, George W. Bush dodged the draft. Now their paths are crossing again*

BY OLIVER BURKEMAN  
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# Stone, to say the least

## [ TECHNOLOGY REVIEW ]

With many electronics manufacturers around the world once again playing catch-up to Apple's innovations, it is no surprise that Nokia has announced its first touch-screen mobile, which is more than a little similar to Apple's iPhone.

"If there is something good in the world, then we copy with pride," Anssi Vanjoki, Nokia's Executive Vice President, said when asked about similarities between the new Nokia 5800 XpressMusic and the iPhone. While the words "iPhone clone" are now being used to describe almost anything with a touch screen, the new 5800 has certainly been inspired by the iPhone. Nokia, which previously was openly against touch-screen products, has now changed direction and after 18 months finally responded with its first ever touch-screen handset, the Nokia 5800 XpressMusic.

However, the Nokia 5800 is certainly not directly aimed at the iPhone market. It costs a fraction of the price of an iPhone, offers many different features and ships with a huge built-in collection of music. Quite clearly Apple has started a trend and this is only just the beginning of Nokia's attempt at winning some of the market. Their future touch-screen products within the N-series range of phones are more likely to be

direct competitors to the iPhone in terms of price and hardware.

Ironically, it is not the hardware as such that competes with Apple's business model — Nokia doesn't yet need to worry about Apple's tiny bite into the mobile market; what concerns the company more seems to be the iTunes Store.

Apple's iTunes Store currently holds around 90 percent of the digital music market, which represents more than 5 billion songs sold worldwide to date. Nokia's new "Comes With Music" contract, launched in London last week, is clearly what threatens Apple the most, since it allows users to download as much music as they like for free within a 12-month period — provided they purchase the new 5800 handset from Nokia, which was priced at US\$230 at its recent UK release. Apple will undoubtedly suffer from this new package since people will be able to download their tunes for free, rather than being forced to use the iTunes store or resort to illegal downloads. Indeed, this is the first initiative in the world that has the potential to compete with music piracy. Illegal music downloading represents 15 percent of the market, according to Nokia's UK managing director Simon Ainslie, who said,



Nokia's touch-screen 5800 XpressMusic may give Apple's iPhone — and iTunes — a run for their money.

PHOTOS: REUTERS

"It is better for music companies to receive something for their music than nothing." With piracy laws becoming more militantly enforced in many countries, illegal music downloaders are bound to feel somewhat drawn to a package that essentially allows legal piracy for the price of an inexpensive, iPhone-like handset.

So what is the 5800 actually like in comparison to the now iconic iPhone? The most major difference is the way the touch screen works. The 5800 allows only one finger to be used

when touching the screen, meaning none of the more human gestures of the iPhone are present. This includes things like "pinching" an image with two fingers in order to zoom in or out. Immediately Apple will be rubbing its hands at this inferior touch screen, which is presumably because the 5800 is a budget phone with a competing contract designed to go head-to-head with iTunes rather than the iPhone itself. Perhaps only time will tell, but this one-handed design could make the phone less cumbersome than the

iPhone, which often requires two-handed operation. However, if Nokia truly intends to encroach on the iPhone market, then it is surely planning a multi-finger touch screen for the future.

Of course, Nokia's legacy allows it a step-up on Apple immediately, as its core expertise has long been in creating mobile phones and doing it well. The 5800 includes a superior camera with a Carl Zeiss lens, 3x digital zoom, autofocus, dual-LED flash and the ability to record video at 640x480 resolution with 30 frames per second. It also has a secondary camera for video conferencing. Comparatively, the iPhone is quite weak on the camera front with no Carl Zeiss lens, no digital zoom, no autofocus, no flash and no recording of video or video conferencing.

The 5800 also boasts other features that are lacking on the iPhone: voice recognition; the ability to send MMS picture messages; file sharing via bluetooth; and a replaceable battery. Some of this can be rationalized: a flash can drain the battery faster; digital zoom is essentially a gimmick; video conferencing is rarely used and requires a second camera; voice recognition is not commonly used; and MMS can be achieved using e-mail instead. Some other omissions, though, are quite unforgivable — no built-in

video recording is an amazing elision, especially with the iPhone's link to YouTube, which contains millions of cellphone-submitted videos. Imagine the frustration of having an iPhone on you when you see something that just needs to be recorded for YouTube! This could be one reason why people may prefer the 5800. Also, the iPhone has no ability to send SMS text messaging to multiple contacts, which is a bizarre oversight. The lack of Adobe Flash support on iPhone also makes no sense and reduces the usability of YouTube dramatically since iPhone users are restricted to YouTube videos encoded in H.264 format.

Although Apple's iPhone and the Nokia 5800 XpressMusic are comparable, at least on first glance, Nokia's answer appears to be a much less expensive and more feature-rich handset — and it comes with a sublime package if you are a music lover. The iPhone, however, has a more advanced touch screen and of course the beauty that comes with a product designed by Apple. It is worth remembering also that many of the iPhone's flaws can be removed by purchasing software from Apple's App Store.

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