

A would-be assassin and his discontent

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The Assassination of Richard Nixon, directed by Niels Mueller, written by Kevin Kennedy and Mueller

The Assassination of Richard Nixon is a remarkable film about social alienation in America with definite implications for contemporary life. Created by first-time US director Niels Mueller, the film was inspired by the story of Samuel Byck, who, on February 22, 1974, attempted to hijack a commercial airliner and crash it into the White House.

Sam Bicke (Sean Penn)—the fictionalized character's name was altered slightly—is a middle-aged "Everyman," whose string of personal and professional failures testify, in part, to the illusory character of the American Dream. What's unusual about Bicke is that he was politically semi-radicalized, during a time of enormous social convulsions, at the same time as he was mentally losing his balance.

The central character's swelling anger and frustration focus on the figure of Richard Nixon. Occupying the Oval Office from January 1969 to August 1974, Nixon was forced to resign in disgrace during his second term as a result of the Watergate scandal.

The film begins two weeks before Sam Bicke's failed assassination attempt.

His life is unraveling: the possibility of saving his marriage to Marie (Naomi Watts)—with whom he has three children—has become painfully remote. Misery dominates in his new job as an office furniture salesman where the likes of Dale Carnegie (*How to Win Friends and Influence People*) and Norman Vincent Peale (*The Power of Positive Thinking*) are promoted as spiritual guides. Owner Jack Jones (Jack Thompson) supplies Sam with dreadful philistine books and tapes that preach the golden rule of selling: "The salesman who believes ... is the salesman who receives."

The fact that Sam is losing emotional ground makes itself felt from the start. He is doomed to fail at this job as he has at all others, including a stint at his brother's successful tire franchise. His family has long ago abandoned him and every desperate attempt at reconciliation brings only further desperation. Bonny Simmons (Don Cheadle), Sam's only friend, is the last buoy in the ocean, shoring him up as best he can.

Scene by scene, Sam falls apart under the weight of pressures he only partly understands. In his own mind, getting his life together now hinges on the success of a business venture—a mobile tire sales and repair service—that he and Bonny have come up with. Already showing signs of intense psychological imbalance, Sam approaches the Small Business Administration for a loan. His "business plan" consists of one crumpled sheet of paper crayoned with an amateurish drawing of a red vehicle.

He wastes energy attempting to sell his idea to a bemused SBA functionary. The outcome is predictable, although Sam would like to attribute the rejection to Bonny's skin color. While there might be a hint of truth in this, more germane is the fact that the film's

protagonist is rapid descending into extreme paranoia.

Sam begins to make a series of tapes addressed to the famous composer-conductor Leonard Bernstein, identified at the time with radical opposition to the Nixon administration. In a world full of lies and deceit, Sam considers the latter's "pure and honest" music to be a counterweight. "Leonard Bernstein," he explains, "I have chosen you to present the truth about me to the world. If I am lucky, the action I am about to take will show the powerful that the least grain of sand has the power to destroy them."

He continues: "Explain to me, Mr. Bernstein, what happened to the little piece of the American Dream that my father and his father had. Is that too much to ask for? This is a good country filled with good people. But what good is good in times like these? People sit their life away waiting for a dream that does not come.... Is independence too much to ask for, Mr. Bernstein? Slavery never really ended in this country—they just gave it another name."

A Black Panther leader, David Hilliard, appears on television, warning that "the masses will decide"; Sam is aroused and goes to the party headquarters to give a donation and register a suggestion, that the Panthers accept white people. "Zebras are black and white. If the Black Panthers become the Zebras they will double in membership." Later, as he watches a televised report of the repression of the Panthers at the hands of the government, his mental state is further undermined.

Another news program shows footage of the September 1973 overthrow of Salvador Allende's Popular Unity government in Chile by a US-backed military coup. More news: CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite reports on the FBI repression of American Indians at Wounded Knee. American Indian Movement leader Russell Means declares that he would rather die than submit to slavery.

Meanwhile Sam witnesses Bonny getting verbally abused by one of his white customers. Homicidal thoughts begin to form in Sam's mind, which become more pronounced as he increasingly focuses on Nixon's hypocrisy and criminality. He reacts strongly to noxious platitudes such as "a nation like a person has to have an inner drive to succeed." Quantity turns into quality, and the "I'm not a crook" speech has Sam screaming, "It's about money, Dick!" More tapes to Bernstein complain that "the meek shall not inherit the earth. The earth belongs to the bullies."

Sam's life takes a further dive when divorce papers arrive. At the same time as he is caught pilfering (in his mind, merely borrowing) from his brother's business; an eviction notice arrives. Finding a modicum of solace in Beethoven, Sam transmits one of his final messages to the music's conductor: "I was nervous unlike the powerful—certainty is the disease of kings.... I just wanted to make a change and stop the lies.... If history teaches us anything, it's that you have got to get the seat of government—the whole goddamn cherry. If you destroy the seat of government then you really make a change."

“Tell me why I did this, Maestro. History needs to be clear on this. They can rebuild the White House, but they will never forget me.” Sam, the outcast, is now in deep psychosis.

As he mails the Bernstein tapes at the Baltimore-Washington airport, he glances at the passengers who might become his victims.

In the film’s production notes, director Mueller explains that he wanted to de-emphasize the assassination attempt in order to underscore his lead character’s alienation. He saw this as a way of indicting a “society that is so inured to violence that no individual act, no matter how horrific, has much impact.”

The Assassination of Richard Nixon is well-made, well-acted and carefully recreates the general atmosphere of the Nixon era. Scenes in Sam’s sepia-shaded apartment, dominated by his escalating angst and punctuated by Beethoven, are affecting. Penn goes to the depths of his character’s psyche and psychosis with an extraordinary measure of courage and commitment. Sam Bicke wants what everybody wants—that elusive brass ring known as the American Dream—but *not at the expense of exploiting or manipulating people*. How can this be accomplished? It appears as if his adult life has been consumed with this dilemma. Behind the mirage, he discovers the reality is an Impossible Dream and feels cheated and irrelevant.

Moments in Mueller’s film insightfully capture the unbearable conflicts generated by this state of affairs. The photo of Sam’s family—the perfect American unit—on his work desk is like a religious icon overseeing the ceaseless demand of having to make a living through opportunism and deceit. It seems to mock those who identify the process, Sam in particular, with what it is—a form of slow, painful death.

Sales boss Jack, the small-time peddler and conman, merely mirrors the big-time liars at the top of the food chain. This is succinctly expressed when Jack points to a speechifying Nixon, ecstatically puffing: “He’s the greatest salesman in the country. He made a promise about getting us out of the Vietnam War and didn’t deliver.”

The scene with the Black Panther leader balances Sam’s objective sense of social injustice with an acute craving to belong. His emotional needs are relentless and insatiable—no one except the sole working class character, Bonny, attempts to understand and oblige. In fact, the film’s strength is its audacious attempt to show the correlation between the vile politics and policies of the powers that be and their damaging impact on society’s most sensitive and vulnerable.

According to the production notes, how “a seemingly ordinary man can explode in this manner—how he can simply lose his way in society—is one of the many themes of *The Assassination of Richard Nixon* that connects this 30-year-old story to contemporary times. Described in broad strokes, it dramatizes the diminished quality of life under a corrupt Republican administration that has waged a divisive, unpopular war, and that has been accused of tampering with a national election. As such, one can’t help but see striking parallels to today’s America.”

This leads to another question and perhaps points to something of a distortion in the film. Although the film concentrates on Sam’s individual explosion (and implosion), the social explosions, particularly the massive anti-Vietnam War movement, are largely absent. In concentrating on this particular reaction to the policies of the Nixon administration (and by implication, those of the current Bush administration) it is important somehow to make present in the story the fact that Bicke’s response was an isolated case. To paraphrase Trotsky, even in times of unexampled crisis, mad acts like this constitute an unimportant percentage. Peoples do not go mad,

“they seek a way out through revolution.”

In fact, it was the combined struggle of the Vietnamese people and the massive opposition within the US, together with a growing economic crisis, that eventually shipwrecked the Nixon government and ended the war. Although Mueller is not obliged to incorporate this into his film, there would have been a slightly different artistic and thematic alignment had the widespread resistance to Nixon’s policies been registered in some manner, subterranean or otherwise.

Mueller confirms this in the negative when he states: “I can’t imagine that most people who see a film based on the true story of a man who tried to dive bomb a plane into the White House won’t be thinking about how it speaks to their own lives, and how it addresses the current events that affect us all.”

Contrary to Bicke’s claim to Bernstein, he has not been remembered and not simply because his plan never got off the ground. Why not? Because however legitimately disturbed he was by the filthiness of the Nixon White House, Bicke chose an utterly reactionary and futile method of expressing his opposition: individual terrorism. Despite his visit to the Black Panther headquarters, Bicke was cut off and drew no enduring sustenance from the radicalized mass movements of the time. In a period of vast social upheaval, the actions of deranged individuals, in the final analysis, do not leave a lasting mark. The film’s attitude to these questions is murky at best. Certainly Mueller is not advocating his protagonist’s path, although he sympathizes with his plight, but then what precisely? *The Assassination of Richard Nixon* goes blank on a number of important questions.

It is striking, however, to take note of Bicke’s heartfelt denunciations of social inequality and the powerlessness of the oppressed in the America of 1973, at a time when labor militancy and mass protest was, in fact, narrowing the social divide. How much more indignation should today’s conditions generate, among healthier social elements! The top one percent of the US population controlled 34 percent of the national household wealth in 1965, 29 percent by 1976 and 21 percent three years later; today the figure hovers about 40 percent.

Political and historical inadequacies notwithstanding, *The Assassination of Richard Nixon* offers a serious and rare glimpse into the rampant disaffection that pervades American life. The film is more than unusual in its attempt to connect society’s dysfunction and popular misery with the actions of a hypocritical, mendacious ruling elite.



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