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## Oliver Stone Reveals a Vulnerable Putin

**Exclusive: The U.S. political/media demonization of Russia's Putin is unrelenting, but an interview series with director Oliver Stone poses tough questions to Putin while also letting Americans see the real person, writes Robert Parry.**

By Robert Parry  
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Before we stumble into a nuclear war and end life on the planet, the American people might want to watch Oliver Stone's four-part series of interviews with Russian President Vladimir Putin on "Showtime." Stone accomplishes what Western journalists should do but don't, by penetrating deeply into the personality of this historic figure.

Typically these days, American TV news personalities use interviews with a demonized foreign leader, like Putin, to demonstrate their own "toughness" on air, hurling insulting questions at the target and pretending that this preening behavior proves their courage.

In reality, it is bad journalism for a wide variety of reasons: The interview subject will normally retreat into canned talking points, so nothing is really learned; the TV viewer will get to see some theatrics but no insights into what makes the foreign leader tick; and – most importantly – chances of going to war with the despised leader's country increase.

Yet, it's not all bad: the "confrontation" will boost the career prospects of the self-aggrandizing "journalist" who will add the highlights of the insult-fest to his or her video résumé.

Stone does something quite different and, in today's modern world, quite remarkable. As you go deeper into the four segments of "The Putin Interviews," you begin to realize that Stone, the award-winning movie director, is using his directorial skills to peel back the layers of self-consciousness that can inhibit an actor from reaching his or her full potential, but, in this case, Stone is using those same techniques to get Putin to reveal more of his true self.

By coming across as unthreatening and personable – almost like the TV detective Columbo – Stone strips away many of Putin's defenses, creating a dynamic in which the Russian president struggles between his characteristic cautiousness and a willingness to be more candid.

Putin seems to like Stone while sensing that Stone is playing him. In one of the early interviews, in July 2015, Stone asks Putin about the "ambiguity" of Josef Stalin's legacy, obviously a sensitive and complex question for a Russian who may admire Stalin's determination during World War II but abhor Stalin's excesses in annihilating political enemies.

“I think you are a cunning person,” Putin tells Stone.

### **Stone Directs Putin**

At the start of a late interview in February 2017, Stone even acts like a director, dispatching Putin down a hallway so his entrance can be more dramatically filmed. “Pretend we haven’t seen each other in months,” Stone tells Putin.

After Putin has retreated down the hallway, Stone yells, “Action! Action!” but when nothing happens, he tells the official interpreter, “Tell him ‘action’ in Russian.”

Then, after more delay, Stone seeks out his assistant director: “Where’s my A.D.? Come on! Where’s my A.D.?” before worrying that maybe Putin “went into another meeting.”

But Putin finally strolls down the hallway, carrying two cups of coffee, offering one to Stone in English, “Coffee, sir?”

Yet, perhaps the climatic scene in this tension between “director” and “actor” comes at the end of the four-part series when Putin seems to recognize that Stone may have gotten the better of him in this friendly competition spread out in conversations from July 2015 to February 2017.

After finishing what was meant to be the last interview (though a later one was tacked on), Putin turns to Stone and voices concern for the risks that the director is taking by undertaking this series of interviews which Putin knows – because the interviews are not openly antagonistic to Putin – will draw a hostile reaction from the mainstream U.S. media.

At that moment, the roles get reversed. Putin, the wary subject of Stone’s interviews, is being solicitous of Stone, throwing the director off-balance.

“Thank you for your time and your questions,” Putin tells Stone. “Thank you for being so thorough.” Putin then adds: “Have you ever been beaten?”

Caught off guard, Stone replies: “Beaten? Oh, yes.”

Putin: “So it’s not going to be something new, because you are going to suffer for what you are doing.”

Stone: “Oh, sure, yeah. I know but it’s worth it if it brings some more peace and cautiousness to the world.”

Putin: “Thank you.”

What the savvy Putin understands is that Stone will face recriminations in the United States for treating the Russian president with any degree of respect and empathy.

In modern America – the so-called “land of the free, home of the brave” – a new media paradigm has taken hold, in which only the official U.S. side of a story can be told; any suggestion that there might be another side of the Russia story, for

instance, makes you a “Putin apologist,” a “Moscow stooge” or a disseminator of “propaganda” and “fake news.”

## **Harsh Reviews**

And Putin was not mistaken. The early mainstream media’s reaction to Stone’s interview series has concentrated on attacking Stone for not being tougher on Putin, just as Putin expected.

For instance, The New York Times headlines its review in its print editions, “Letting Vladimir Putin Talk, Unchallenged,” and begins with a swipe at Stone for his “well-established revisionist views on American history and institutions.” Stone is also mocked for questioning the current elite groupthink that Russia helped make “Donald J. Trump president of the United States.”

The Washington Post column by Ann Hornaday was even snarkier, entitled in print editions: “Stone drops cred to give a Russian bear hug.” Although only seeing the first two segments of the four-part series, Hornaday clearly wanted Stone to perform one of those self-righteous confrontations, like all the “star journalists” do, beating their breasts and repeating the usual litany of unsubstantiated charges against Putin that pervade the major U.S. media.

Hornaday writes: “But what might have once promised to be an explosive on-screen matching-of-wits instead arrives just in time to be colossally irrelevant: an erstwhile scoop made instantly negligible by the breaking news it’s been engulfed by, and the imaginative and ideological limits of its director.”

The truth, however, is that Stone asks pretty much all the tough questions that one would pose to Putin and succeeds in drawing Putin out from his protective shell. In so doing, Stone sheds more light on the potentially existential conflict between the two nuclear-armed superpowers than anything else that I have seen.

While the series makes some genuine news, it also allows Putin to explain his thinking regarding some of the key controversies that have stoked the New Cold War, including his reaction to the Ukraine crisis. While Putin has offered these explanations before, they will be news to many Americans because Putin’s side of the story has been essentially blacked out by the major U.S. newspapers and networks.

## **A Vulnerable Character**

Personally, I came away from watching “The Putin Interviews” both more and less impressed with the Russian leader. What I saw was a more vulnerable personality than I had expected, but I was impressed by Putin’s grasp of global issues, including a sophisticated understanding of American power.

Putin surely does not appear to be the diabolical monster that current American propaganda presents, which may be the greatest accomplishment of Stone’s series, revealing Putin as a multi-dimensional and complex figure. You may go into the series expecting a cartoonish villain, but that is not what you’ll find.

Putin comes across as a politician and bureaucrat who found himself, somewhat unwittingly and unwillingly, thrust into a historical role at an extraordinarily challenging time for Russia.

In the 1990s, Russians were reeling from the devastating impact of U.S.-prescribed economic “shock therapy” after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The nation’s riches were sold off to well-connected thieves who became known as the “oligarchs,” overnight billionaires who used their riches to gain control of the political and media levers of power. Meanwhile, average Russians fell into poverty and saw their life expectancy drop at unparalleled rates for a country not at war.

Boris Yeltsin, the Russian Federation’s first president and a corrupt drunkard who was kept in power by American manipulation of the 1996 Russian election, picked Putin, a former KGB intelligence officer and security bureaucrat, to be his prime minister in August 1999.

To Stone, Putin explains his hesitancy to accept the promotion: “When Yeltsin offered me the job for the first time, I refused. ... He invited me into his office and told me he wanted to appoint me Prime Minister, and that he wanted me to run for President. I told him that was a great responsibility, and that meant I would have to change my life, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to do that. ...

“It’s one thing when you are a bureaucrat, even a high-level one, you can almost live an ordinary life. You can see your friends, go to the cinema and the theater, and not assume personal responsibility for the fate of millions of people and for everything that is going on in the country. And to assume responsibility for Russia back then was a very difficult thing to do.”

### **Family Fears**

Putin continues: “Frankly speaking, I didn’t know what President Yeltsin’s final plans were with regard to me. And I didn’t know how long I would be there. Because at any moment the President could tell me, ‘You are fired.’ And there was only one thing I was thinking about, ‘Where to hide my children?’ ...

“Just imagine, if I were dismissed, I didn’t have any bodyguards. Nothing. And what would I do? How would I live? How would I secure my family? And back then I decided if that was my fate, then I had to go to the end. And I didn’t know beforehand that I would become President. There were no guarantees of that.”

However, at the dawn of the new Millennium, Yeltsin surprisingly announced his resignation, making Putin his heir apparent. It was a time of extraordinary crisis for Russia and Russians.

When Stone compares the challenges that President Ronald Reagan faced in the 1980s to those that Putin confronted when he took power in 2000, Putin replied, with classic Russia whimsy, “Almost being broke and actually being broke are two entirely different things.”

Once assuming office, however, Putin set about reining in many of the oligarchs and rebuilding the Russian economy and social safety net. His success in achieving an

economic turnaround and a marked improvement in the social metrics explain much of his enduring popularity with the Russian people.

But Putin does not come off as a natural politician. When you see Putin up close for the several hours of these interviews, you can't miss his unease in the spotlight, a tight control, even a shyness. Yet, there is a winning quality from that vulnerability which seems to have further endeared him to the Russian people.

Compared to many Western politicians, Putin also has retained a common touch. One scene shows Stone interviewing Putin as the Russian president drives his own car, something you would never see an American president doing.

Putin also takes Stone along for a hockey match in which the now 64-year-old Putin dons a uniform and laces up skates for a wobbly performance on the ice. By his own admission, he just began skating a few years earlier and he takes a couple of falls or stumbles. Putin doesn't come across as the all-powerful autocrat of U.S. propaganda.

At the end of part two of "The Putin Interviews," Stone even gets Putin to watch Stanley Kubrick's 1964 Cold War classic "Dr. Strangelove or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb," a very dark comedy about the U.S. and the Soviet Union stumbling into a nuclear conflagration, a film that Putin hadn't seen before.

After watching the movie with Stone, Putin reflects on its enduring message. "The thing is that since that time little has changed," Putin says. "The only difference is that the modern weapon systems have become more sophisticated, more complex. But this idea of retaliatory weapons, and the inability to control such weapon systems still hold true to this day. It has become even more difficult, more dangerous."

Stone then gives Putin the movie's DVD case, which Putin carries into an adjoining office before realizing that it is empty. He reemerges, holding the empty case with the quip, "Typical American gift." An aide then rushes up to hand him the DVD.

**[More about the substance of "The Putin Interviews" to come.]**