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Getting to Know Oliver Stone

At a recent event, he revealed the absurdity of his worldview.

By John Fund

At first, I was appalled that Hollywood filmmaker Oliver Stone (*JFK*, *Nixon*) was appearing on a panel at this year's conference of Students for Liberty, a nationwide libertarian youth organization. Stone is a conspiracy-monger of the first order whose twisted historical revisionism has deluded millions. He recently told the *Daily Beast* that the United States is an "international terror" that other nations should keep down.

But I was wrong; the event proved quite educational.

Stone appeared on a panel called "The National Security State," along with Jeremy Scahill (the national-security correspondent for *The Nation* magazine) and Peter Kuznick (a history professor who co-wrote Stone's loopy 2012 Showtime series *Untold History of the United States*).

The major surprise was just how bitter some left-wingers are with the Obama administration's national-security record. Scahill tried to feed into the libertarian ethos of the 1,000 students in the audience by declaring that "when it comes to national-security policy, we only have one party: the war party." But all the panelists reserved their tartest taunts for Democrats.

Scahill zinged Fox News for trying to paint President Obama as a "Muslim Manchurian candidate," but also dismissed MSNBC as "like a DNC meet-up." He blamed that network and other liberal outlets for defending Obama policies: "Obama has convinced liberals he is fighting a clean war," he said, or, alternatively, "Democrats have checked their conscience at the door of the Obama presidency."

Stone began by trying to make what he must have thought was an outreach to the audience by resurrecting and agreeing with the Old Right chestnut that "Roosevelt lied us into World War II." He followed that up with highly personal criticism of Obama — claiming, in effect, that the president has been brainwashed by his national-security advisers into becoming pro-war. "The man stunned us with a lack of spine, he's a weak man," he mourned.

Many of the students agreed with panel's general criticism of America's military commitments. One noted that America still has 54,000 troops in Germany and 39,000 troops in Japan a full 70 years after World War II and a full 25 years after Communism's collapse. But then a spirited group of Latin American students attending the panel decided to directly challenge Stone's left-wing support for Latin dictators from Fidel Castro to Hugo Chávez.

Two months before Chávez's death last year, Stone praised him on CNN, declaring with a straight face: "He represents hope and change, the things that Obama stood for in our country in 2008." This past Thursday, in anticipation of the event, the Latin American students published an "Open Letter to Oliver Stone" that declared:

It is easy to crusade for socialism when you do not suffer the struggles many Latin Americans go through every day in search for food, the long lines in supermarkets to secure the most basic consumer products — not to mention skyrocketing inflation and other perils that socialism imposes on individuals. . . . Defending characters like Fidel Castro or Hugo Chávez, as you clearly do in your body of work and public statements, is safe when you know that your private property and the fruits of your labor will not be exploited by the politicians in charge. . . . We would like to share our experiences with you, to illustrate the violence that our governments promote and in the case of Venezuela, openly practice.

Perhaps then you will understand that situations "south of the border" are very different from those portrayed in your documentaries and other propaganda. We would like to publicly convey our utter disagreement with your support towards governments that restrict liberties in our side of the continent. Fortunately, and paradoxically, you will be able to express your opinions freely, even as you support governments that silence everyone who thinks differently.

During the question-and-answer session, Luis Eduardo Barrueto of Guatemala read some of the group's open letter to the panel and asked for a response. What followed was revealing. Stone, who is producing a biopic on the life of Hugo Chávez, said the American media don't give Venezuela a fair shake and implied that student protests against the regime there weren't legitimate. "Venezuela is a democratically elected government. These people who keep protesting are sore losers," he told the skeptical audience. He said revolutionary changes were needed in the country because rich people still owned so much of it.

I spoke with several of the Latin American students afterward, and they were appalled. When it came to Venezuela, they noted that Human Rights Watch recently concluded that "the concentration of power and erosion of human rights protections had given the government free rein to intimidate, censor, and prosecute Venezuelans who criticized the president or thwarted his political agenda."

"Just a few days ago, three students were shot dead in Caracas and one of our Students for Liberty colleagues, Jesus Armas, was jailed," Gabriel Salas of Venezuela told me in disgust. "The populists always justify repression in the name of the poor, but they are impoverishing everyone," Antonella Marty of Argentina added.

After the panel, Stone and another panelist privately admitted how impressed they were by the large number of libertarian student attendees, acknowledging the left would have had difficulty assembling such numbers. On his way out, Stone wandered by the libertarian Cato Institute's table and picked up a copy of its pocket U.S. Constitution to take with him.

“Would that Stone acted to bring constitutional freedoms to the Latin Americans he claims to speak for,” said Humberto Rotondo of Peru, shaking his head. “I think he exposed the absurdity of his position to everyone here.”