

## The American Tattoo



Tattoos leave a mark – for better or worse. Sometimes they turn out stylish and have a heart-warming meaning that reaffirm what you believe and feel as a person. Sometimes they turn out messy and confusing, permanently inking a part of your body that you can't avoid and is now part of your everyday frustrations.

Sometimes it's the word "MOM."

Sometimes it's a Japanese phrase that translates to some variation of "don't be a jerk".

Sometimes it's like a weird bird feather.

Sometimes it's Richard Nixon's face.

And according to the Netflix documentary *Get Me Roger Stone*, if your name's America, your permanent mark is the existence of the man, the myth, the dark legend: Roger Stone.

“It is better to be infamous than to have never been famous at all” – and so begin Roger Stone’s rules, and ultimately the film’s rules, on how to become an active success in propaganda (Stone). The film follows the life, career, beliefs, and method through which Roger Stone affected the American public and the American political system over the past 40 plus years through an upending of basic political norms, attitudes and morality. To Stone, it doesn’t matter whether you’re the good guy or the bad guy to someone. If you’re “the guy,” you are by definition having an effect on someone. The very first line of the film is one delivered by then presidential nominee Donald Trump at the 2016 Republican National Convention and sums up the main focus of Stone’s style of political communication. “We must break free from the petty politics of the past. All of the people telling you, you can’t have the country you want. We love defeating those people, don’t we?” (Trump). Stone’s philosophy is one of disruption. One that breeds a mentality of anti-establishment and anti-elitist fervor, that is then pointed at the government. And to deal with this frustration not through polite discussion or respectful exchange of ideas – but through visceral action and hardcore, anti-PC sentiment that is not willing to cooperate or listen to reason. The film’s main point by its mere existence, is that propaganda by way of win-at-all costs, upfront, anti-establishment passion is both entertaining and effective as both a documentary, but also as a tried-and-true method of public persuasion.

The film largely agrees with the effectiveness of Stone’s efforts, exhibiting how all the ways since Nixon that he has had a hand in raising the power of the republican party. Through reinvention of *how* the party preaches its politics to even the reinvention of *what* the party’s politics are. As described by New Yorker reporter Jeffrey Toobin in the film, Roger’s heavy focus on extended campaigns of negative attack ads were a shift in *how* Republicans went sought political gains. But when he became the head of the Young Republicans he was a symbol of a

shift to a farther right mentality of *what* the party was standing for. A spit in the face to the former Republican identity of kind-hearted and sweet Eisenhower-esque men. And an active appreciation for the new right's playing dirty and winning at all costs (Toobin). The film also does very little to refute his seemingly endless power of influence, briefly exhibiting opinions of how during his exploits in the 2000 election to get George W. Bush elected, that he may have just been in the right place at the right time. That perhaps he gets too much credit for the calculated destruction of the Reform party during the election and that this could be a pattern of him just being a man always aligning himself with the right ideas and people at the right times. But this almost the only instance of where he is shown to maybe be a fake, or an illusion of the revolutionary the film spends far more screen time promoting. The percentage of examples against the effectiveness of Stone's work versus the percentage of material that is in favor of his effectiveness is miniscule.

The only real tension between filmmakers Daniel DiMauro, Dylan Bank, and Morgan Pehme and Roger Stone is whether what he does is morally ok. From both a political perspective in wanting people to agree with your beliefs, and from the mere human perspective of "is this ok?" Such as when the film alleges Stone released the information regarding Pat Buchanan's illegitimate child, all in the effort to undermine an entire political party. Or how he submits to promoting and agreeing with the misinformation like the "birther theory" and working with conspiracy theorists like Alex Jones. All in order to reach people that he identifies with, and thus can turn. People who are "skeptical about the bullshit government is always trying to peddle you. Sure, it's a non-elitist crowd, but they're Americans and they vote" (Stone). Here is the first genuine moment where the filmmakers seem to take real issue with Stone because they follow this exploration into his ties with Alex Jones and *Info Wars* with videos of both politicians and

interviewees taking issue with his act of bringing the conspiratorial fringe into the mainstream. Highlighting the racist, violent, and reprehensible lies that impregnate citizens' minds due to the dissemination of falsehoods by Stone. But the filmmakers are keen to balance out the moral center of the film in the last 10 minutes before the end of the film, as they then take us through the 2016 election like it's an abridges version of a *Rocky* movie. He is shown as the underdog. The man who is against-all-odds taking on the established political system with no one believing him, his candidate, or his beliefs could win this election. And sure enough, when you see countless MSNBC anchors and CNN pollsters plastered back-to-back repeating endlessly how impossible it's going to be for our main character to win, you do sympathize with his fight for a deeply personal sense of recognition and triumph.

The four main arguments that the directors are making with their film are as follows. Donald Trump and the current state of American politics are a manifestation of Stone's beliefs and actions, any publicity is wonderful publicity, hate is more powerful than love, and the media is as responsible as Stone for the proliferation of his etiquette and beliefs.

The main through line from the first shot of the film to the last is Donald Trump's presidency, and how his rise to power is the direct result of Stone's life's work. They do this by showing the intimate relationship that Stone and Trump have had since the early 80's, constantly referring to how Stone always thought Trump would make a great president. That he was a vessel for his ideals, or as Stone puts it, he is a jockey, and Trump is his "prime piece of political horseflesh" (Stone). They show his alleged manipulation of Trump during the 2000 election to undermine the Reform party expressing his ability to toggle Trump's political aspirations at will. And the most effective imagery they utilize to convey the connection between Stone and Trump, is that of a juxtaposition they use. They will first show Roger expressing his anti-elitist

sentiments in a personal interview, and then immediately cut to a Trump rally, with Roger nowhere in sight, and off the campaign trail, but with thousands of people chanting the very same anti-establishment rhetoric that Stone has built his entire political career upon. Roger gives a speech where he says, “We created ISIS,” and then it’s a jump-cut to Trump saying to a rally of thousands that “Obama created ISIS.” It’s a materialization of Stone’s fringe ideas becoming the mainstream through his effectiveness to direct Trump. It’s a biting piece of editing that sticks in your mind and is hard to disagree with.

His cynical approach to publicity and be noticed for anything, no matter how awful, is another aspect the film preaches. Stone just wants to be recognized, once you do that, you can’t be ignored, and neither can what you believe. You see this use of cynicism further explained in Slavoj Žižek’s *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek states:

“Cynicism is not a direct position of immorality, it is more like morality itself put in the service of immorality - the model of cynical wisdom is to conceive probity, integrity, as a supreme form of dishonesty, and morals as a supreme form of profligacy, the truth as the most effective form of a lie (Žižek 26).”

His rejection of PC culture and his emphasis on “anything goes” in a pursuit of political gain reflect a cynical rejection to the morality of politics. But it’s actually not the morality of politics. It’s the morality of the *establishment’s* politics. He is creating a whole new sub-genre of political ethics and conduct that is ore cut-throat, more focused on spreading false information, and one that express no sympathy to the opponent. Compromise is out of the question and moderation is not in fashion. His candor of such sentences like saying “My attitude regarding those who criticize me for being friends with Roy Cohn or Richard Nixon is... f--k'em,” and that “those who say I have no soul, those who say I have no principles are losers, those are bitter losers.” He is getting rid of any political niceties about what he’s supposed to say and is

transparent with how he feels about his enemies. In doing so he reflects Žižek's writing by making the new major form of honesty a rude, violent dialogue and in turn makes any effort to compromise or mince words active lies. Making the "tells-it-like-it-is" mentality of being openly racist, misogynistic, and aggressive more attractive to the American public, and thus, okay for them to not subdue those terrible beliefs. The film revels in this with everything from the quotes they pull from Roger, to the extravagant Bond villain type outfits he always seems to find himself in. Thus, this radical, cynical subversion of how a political figure is supposed to act make for an entertaining protagonist that, like the media, you can't take your eyes off of.

His active hatred and focus on attacking the opposition are shown to be effective, in that in most of the events they show Robert masterminding, they are to take someone down or to negatively go after or expose an opponent. Even when he's advocating for a candidate, it's advocating for a candidate by attacking the opposition. Positivity is boring and isn't as powerful as hate, according to the film. He does this by scapegoating the established order of elites. He makes it more attractive to a wider base by even stating in the film that this isn't about Republicans versus Democrats, but that this is the elite congressmen and women on both sides who have lost touch with the American people. This is the textbook core of agitation propaganda as pointed out by Jacques Ellul in *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*. He explains that "[agitation propaganda] is most often subversive propaganda and has the stamp of opposition. It is led by a party seeking to destroy the government or the established order" (Ellul 71). Throughout the film Stone speaks on how he identifies with outsiders, with people who feel like the system in place has forgotten them. The film exhibits this in multiple ways, especially through the repetition of the phrase by Nixon, Stone, and Trump of "the silent majority." The film has the moments but then will cut to viral videos of Stone's followers attacking random

other citizens in violent and prejudiced ways. This feels like a missed beat as they should be showing these people acting this way more towards the government, and their leaders versus other citizens, so this point can, at times, be muddled in the edit. But still, these people are attacking, just like Stone's methods of propaganda. His followers are simply sticking to one of Stone's Rules: Attack, attack, attack – never defend.

The media is subtly shown to be an equal part in Stone's rise to both power and infamy, as throughout the film they are shown praising the so-called dastardliness of Stone's intellect and actions. He's a villain they love to hate. The very first quotes from the movie that aren't Roger Stone or Donald Trump, are two *New Yorker* reporters. Jeffrey Toobin and Jane Mayer's introductory lines to the film are:

“In the world of political consulting, there's a number of rogues, but there's really nobody quite like Roger Stone” (Mayer).

And:

“The sinister Forrest Gump of American Politics. He's not just this simpleminded guy, but this Machiavellian, almost crazy guy who shows up at every key moment in recent American history” (Toobin).

So, our first impression right off the bat, is that even his opponents are intimidated yet enamored by his persona. Even the diction they use is an example of the tasty language and enthralling discussion that Roger Stone as an entity inspires in writers. Roger “understanding the dark heart of the media” is exemplified in his attack on politician Elliot Spitzer (Toobin). He knows the inescapable intrigue that is created when you conjure a story that combines a powerful political figure, a sex worker, weird sock fetishes, and the lies that attempt to cover them all up. He knows that those aren't important aspects. But that to you, me, and the public – it's like candy. We know it's not important and that it's bad for us, but for some reason we can't help but eat it. They

talk about how ingrained he is with all of American politics for the last half-century that, in their defense, it seems impossible not to talk about him. Their acceptance of his massive influence and increasing hatred of his methods only prove to make the man more intriguing and his influence more palpable. A revolutionary without an audience who will listen is just a crazy guy on the street. He needs his audience. And they provided him a hateful yet absolutely adoring one.

The film absolutely operates as a propaganda, but one that can be construed in a multitude of ways. It can be seen as a wake-up call to explain to Democrats why 2016 happened, it can be seen as a promotion of the type of character Roger Stone exhibits because his character is the type that gets America to believe what he believes, and it can be seen as a way to shift blame for the current political climate from the lightning rod of Trump, to the planned mastermind of Roger Stone. Due to Roger Stone's appreciation for his own highly vilified status, the documentary despite leaning into a liberal perspective of how his career has affected modern politics, the character of Roger Stone and the people like who follow him may actually find this documentary pleasing. It is in tone with the ethics and the persona of what Stone embodies. So, if this film is a tattoo, then it looks very comfortable resting on the proud, nasty bicep of Roger Stone. But on America, this tattoo might be one that it wishes it never got and may try to cover up with a long sleeve shirt. But a tattoo has an impact. For better or worse.

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