

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB SPEAKERS EVENT WITH OLIVER STONE

SUBJECT: "SOUTH OF THE BORDER," HIS NEW FILM

MODERATOR: ALAN BJERGA, PRESIDENT, NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

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**ALAN BJERGA:** Good afternoon, and welcome to the National Press Club. My name is Alan Bjerga. I'm a reporter for Bloomberg News and the President of the National Press Club. We're the world's leading professional organization for journalists and are committed to our profession's future through our programming and by fostering a free press worldwide. For more information about the Press Club, please visit our website at [www.press.org](http://www.press.org). To donate to our professional training programs, please visit [www.press.org/library](http://www.press.org/library).

On behalf of our members worldwide, I'd like to welcome our speaker and attendees at today's event, which includes guests of our speaker as well as working journalists. I'd also like to welcome our broadcast audiences.

Mention "Natural Born Killers," "Born on the Fourth of July," or "Platoon," and one film director's name comes to mind. But our speaker today is here to tell us about what's coming up next, his latest film, "South of the Border," and his experience making the movie about Latin America leaders.

Best known for his work on Vietnam-related films, Oliver Stone for this film spent time with his crew traveling around five Latin American countries interviewing seven leaders, including Cuba's Raul Castro and Venezuela's Hugo Chavez. Working on the film included traveling with Chavez to try to rescue hostages held by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, known by its acronym FARC. Chavez, who rarely does media interviews, even talked with the BBC in preparation for the release of Mr. Stone's latest film.

Mr. Stone is here today with screenwriters Tariq Ali and Mark Weisbrot, who can answer questions about the movie which is premiering on Friday. A filmmaker for more than three decades, Mr. Stone is the winner of three Academy Awards. He's also no stranger to criticism, nor has he hesitated to voice his own. He has criticized U.S. policies in South America, including its drug war in Colombia, and one of the major actors in "South of the Border" is the media. To shed a different light on Latin America's changing political landscape, please welcome to the National Press Club Oliver Stone. (Applause)

**MR. STONE:** Thank you, Alan, Angela and Andrew, for having me back after so many years. Some of you are dead, I guess; 1992, January, I remember that day, the JFK controversy. With me are my writing collaborators, Tariq Ali, historian and writer. Thank you, Tariq for coming from London. And Mark Weisbrot, who is a Washington local and cofounder of the Center for Economic Policy and Research. It's fitting to come here to discuss my last film, "South of the Border." Those of you who had a chance to see it know that we take a pretty unflinching look at the American media and the role they play in perpetuating misconceptions. I'm not here to fight with you-- well, maybe a little-- but to hopefully shed some light on a great story taking place just beyond our borders.

Forty years ago, most of South America was run by oligarchs and military dictators. Small groups of guerillas threw themselves into battle against mighty military machines backed by Washington and were destroyed. Che Guevara was captured and executed. Dissidents were disappeared in Brazil, Argentina, Chile. We toppled elected governments in Guatemala and Chile. We embargoed Cuba, we armed the contras against the legitimate government of Nicaragua. Torturers were kept busy and often they were trained by us in South Vietnam or in the School of the Americas.

The results were a disaster, a disaster. Bill Clinton apologized to the Guatemalans for the role played by the U.S. during the Cold War in aiding a genocide in that country where tens of thousands of indigenous natives were massacred. That world has changed as the Cold War came to an end. South America was permitted democracy and the continent began to breathe again. Economically, however, the International Monetary Fund and the U.S. Treasury Department kept tight control. When that system, however, could not, which they call in South America the Washington consensus, or more aptly neo liberal economics, when that system could not deliver the goods, these countries imploded. Argentina and Venezuela and Bolivia. As a result, elected leaders who pledged to change course, they kept their promises for a change which made them popular with the poor, but not the rich who became very upset.

But, the new leaders, as in a fairy tale, kept winning elections democratically. They were charged with all kinds of manipulation and fraud, but none of it could be proven. Democracy actually meant something in South America, a lot more than what it meant in Florida in 2000.

Our government didn't like this. And in particular, they targeted Hugo Chavez, the elected leader of a country with vast oil reserves. No elected-- well, of all the elected

leaders in the world, he is one of the most vilified. And for what? Essentially for fulfilling his electoral pledges. We tried to topple him. We backed a coup d'etat in April of 2002, we backed it against him and it failed, quickly. But, there was a tremendous amount of public resentment against the United States in Venezuela and their allies in South America.

And for this reason, this initial reason, I was curious and on the advice of some friends such as Mark, I wanted to-- and Fernando Sulichin, who's here today, our producer, Fernando, I wanted to go down there and see for myself. I have some past knowledge of South America. I made "Salvador" in the 1980s about that horrible situation in Central America. I made "Comandante" on Fidel Castro, an interview with Fidel Castro. And I also followed up with something called "Looking for Fidel," which was on HBO in 2004, a follow-up to that documentary. But this was a new deal. This was a few years later and a new mood was in the air.

And I went to see Hugo Chavez and Ivo Morales, the Kirchners, as you saw in the film, and Lula Correa, and Lugo in Paraguay. And what I saw was completely different than what I was hearing on American television and seeing in the press. And I don't mean just the butt of all jokes, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox-- I mean Fox News, no, I don't mean that. I mean also the liberal press, the so-called liberal press. The networks, with a few honorable exceptions, Barbara Walters for one, who joined in essentially a propaganda war against Venezuela.

"South of the Border" is our limited, and it's a humble response. Its aim is simple. It was a political road movie to show a little bit of Hugo and then it was his idea, and he said, "Go out there. Don't believe what I say, go out there and see for yourself. Go talk to my friends. Go talk to the neighbors in the region." And these are six gigantic countries. We went out there and we had the same response. They're all different from each other, no question. But they agree on the important things. They want genuine independence. Independence, what we wanted so many years ago. They wanted political independence, economic independence, and they wanted to help to use their natural resources, which they had in abundance, to help their own people. To help the poor especially because they had suffered the most under the old regimes.

They did not want, and do not want, U.S. military bases on their continent. They do not want those countries in UNASUR seven military bases in Colombia that were expanded under Obama. We were told by the press, we used to be told by the press, that Chavez was the bad left, so to speak, and that Lula was the good left, Lula of Brazil. But now Lula, as of a few weeks ago, is a bad guy because why? With Turkey, a NATO country, he negotiated on his own with Iran on the nuclear issue there against the advice of the United States. He was roundly denounced in this country and by our collaborators in Brazil in the press there.

But being critical of foreign policy doesn't make you evil. Even if you remember, those of you old enough, at the height of the Cold War in the 1950s and '60s, there was in this world a non-aligned bloc of nations; India, Egypt, Nehru, Nasser, Sukarno in

Indonesia, Nkrumah in Africa, Cambodia, there was Tito in Yugoslavia. There were many leaders, strong leaders, who spoke for another bloc. There were three blocs. Until each one of those leaders was toppled, mostly by the United States. But they existed. There was an independent body of thought.

With the disappearance of the Soviet Union, it seems that we don't hear anymore about the dissenting points of the view of other nations. Or, they're regarded as enemies or threats to the United States. Since the Reagan days and added onto by the Wolfowitz/Cheney doctrine that America is the unilateral power in the world that cannot be competed with either economically or militarily, it is impossible to hear third parties, or to even understand the need for other countries to express themselves.

And above all, the growth of that important necessity in the world, regional powers, regional powers being Venezuela with oil, Brazil, a gigantic regional power, China, Russia, Turkey. They are a voice, they're a voice sometimes of sanity in this world. Not going to war, not owning the world or policing the world. We need an opposition, all of us do.

In "South of the Border" you heard the voices of seven presidents. Listen to them, you make up your own mind or start-- I'm sure some of you have already-- but nonetheless, please take into account their feelings. These are gigantic countries with a lot of resources. They speak from their own experience and it's a deep experience. This film is designed to make you rethink, is Chavez a threat to us? Has he hurt America? Is he more dangerous than bin Laden as cable news anchors and reporters tell us? Is that the reason the *New York Times* ended up backing a coup against an elected government without even waiting to see the outcome? And embarrassing themselves when the popular revolt of soldiers and the poor put Chavez back in the presidential palace?

Is it any surprise to you that Chavez and his allies don't like us, aren't friendly to our press and our State Department and like the American people and provide discounted oil, heating oil for several years now, to some 150,000 families who need it, to some homeless shelters, to the native Indian nation. He's pledged as much money as we have to Haiti.

So, we recently returned from another tour of South America to these countries and showed the film to thousands of people in six cities; 3,000 in Caracas, 2,000 in Quito, 6,000 in Cochabamba in Bolivia. It was enormously inspiring. It reminded me once again of the power of film to move people and to change perception.

This week, we open in North America and our people will be able to see it. I hope that at the very least, it will make them rethink what used to be called our back yard. I would say at the risk of repetition that I was struck by how these very different countries share so many common goals. In transformation, they all seek independence from the U.S., corporate and State Department interests. They want to control their own national resources for their people, and they have a desire to shape their own political destiny. It is our hope that "South of the Border" will show North Americans, so many of whom do

not get to hear this side of the story, that it is in their interest to start paying attention. Thank you. (Applause)

**MR. BJERGA:** And thank you very much, Mr. Stone, for taking the time to speak with us today. We're going to keep you up here to respond to some questions. We also have microphones set up for Mr. Weisbrot and Mr. Ali. So please feel free to answer as you need to. Little different format today, but just like film, we try to be a little more experimental here at the National Press Club. So thank you very much.

We have several questions from the audience. Please keep them coming up toward me if you want to ask a question. And our first question from the audience is how successful do you feel that your films have been able to get your message across to the governments of the world?

**MR. STONE:** Well, that's a very tough question to answer because film goes into the subconscious and it works its way gradually. It takes years. You don't see it in the headlines and you don't see it in the temporary effects, sometimes. The more controversial they can be, sometimes they disappear. But they stay there, brewing underneath. I made three Vietnam movies, "Heaven and Earth," "Born on the Fourth of July," and "Platoon." And two of them were very successful here, and I thought that we made a strong statement about Vietnam, or were starting to have all the angles of that war. But within a few years, there was a surge against Vietnam in the '80s. But now, it's moved in the other direction, in the '90s. The day we opened "Born on the Fourth of July," George Bush, Sr., invaded Panama. That was not a good omen. Nor was the first Iraq War and certainly not the second. America continued on its militaristic policies, in my opinion, in Afghanistan and now is threatening sanctions against-- it has sanctions against Iran, which is the beginning, as you remember, those of you, North Vietnam sanctions started many years ago. Sanctions are very dangerous.

So I could say that our effect of those movies was not as I intended. On the other hand, I do believe many young people do come up to me who are now older and they say, "When I was such and such an age, I saw that movie." You know that it's in their eyes and in their manner and in their conscious. It did move them, it did help them to understand the world in another way. So I have hope, although sometimes you do despair of the current situation.

**MR. BJERGA:** One of the distinct political differences that comes across very clearly in that film is the pride with which some South American leaders will describe themselves as socialists, or leaders of socialist movements. Contrast that with the United States where the word "socialist" is used in an attack in a campaign ad, to effect. How do you get rid of the stigma that the word "socialism" or "nationalizing" has in the United States or other capitalist-minded parts of the world?

**MR. STONE:** I would like to say a few words about that, but I'd like Tariq to answer that because he has European and he has, as you know, much of Europe has socialist parties and they're very successful for many years. But in America, it seems to

me it's happening without our knowing it. It's a matter of semantics. I mean, for example the BP oil spill has pointed up the need for corporate responsibility, but at the same time a government responsibility. And I think people are very upset.

If we talk about \$20 billion escrows to clean up-- to give back to the country, we have to think about the enormous profits that are being made by these corporations, oil corporations, with the exploitation of our oil. These are national resources.

I would point out that the leaders of South America seem to be a few years ahead of us in their thinking. They see it differently. They think the oil belongs to them. They think gas belongs to them in Bolivia. The minerals belong to them in those countries. They don't belong to foreign corporations and they should not be taken out of the country without giving something back to the people. And they have acted on that, we have not. It's interesting that people in the same position as South American people, but we can't really say anything. We don't really get that message across because the corporations, the oil corporations, are so important in this country and have such power in Washington. And by that I include not only the oil companies, but the banking companies, insurance companies, the health reform companies, the health companies, so-called. And it's just we are a corporate society. So now is a good time to rethink that. It's a good time. Tariq, can you please talk about Europe a bit or America, whatever you like?

**MR. ALI:** Well, I mean, all one needs to add to what you said there, Oliver, is that of course in Europe where I live, the word socialism doesn't sound so alien to the ear as it does in this country because after the Second World War, it was largely socialist parties which gave their people a free health service, a free education system, subsidized housing. These were all elected governments, and that people still remember. And the national health services, which were created by the state are still there and offering people free health without going through the corporations.

And I think if every American citizen knew how these systems worked, they would find it quite a rational system. The same goes for subsidized housing so that you're not dependent on mortgage companies and that world began to be torn apart in the '90s by deregulation, through privatization, through the sort of new consensus known as the Washington consensus, which implied that the market had the solution to everything.

And then this market which had the solution to everything collapsed at the end of 2008 and it went on its knees before the American state, and the state had to bail it out to the tune of trillions of dollars. That's what the bailouts cost. So, I would say that compared to this irrationality, the social democratic or forms of the social democratic system work much, much better. And this is now being discussed again in places. And even economists here like Joe Stiglitz and people are raising questions as to whether these bailouts are going to work.

And as for the argument that socialism failed, well many people don't think it did, actually. And some are regretting it. But the capitalist system has failed on numerous occasions. 2008 is the last one, but it carries on failing. You have these cycles of failure,

which are then renewed. And often, the market doesn't renew itself, it's renewed by the state.

**MR. BJERGA:** In your film, which the National Press Club was able to screen last night, a major player in the film, a major character, really, is the media which has its role in influencing public opinion. You were highly critical of media organizations, both in the United States and in South America in that film. Several questions here deal with that, and I wanted to ask you a question about your conception of the standards of objectivity and fairness in journalism. Is that worthy goal to pursue? Do you see the mechanics of objectivity abused when you watch media? And was that objectivity something that you tried to aspire to in your film?

**MR. STONE:** A trick question. I did not set myself up as a journalist. I think there's so much criticism of certain governments, of Chavez and Morales and even the Kirchners now. You're talking in North American media, that it is-- to go down there, we are just a counterbalance. We are opening up the idea that this whole thing needs a little different approach. To weigh all the arguments pro and con would have weighed down the film enormously, I think. It would have turned into another kind of film. It was really a one-on-one type introduction to a huge social transformation in a region that is of obvious historic importance.

As I tried to say in my remarks, up to now, except for perhaps Bolivar, and I wasn't around in the 1820s, but if you read the histories, there's been more than 50 interventions in South and Central America by the United States. These are coup d'etats, military interventions and occupations, and sometimes assassination attempts, successful and otherwise. This has happened repeatedly. But they take on, in each of these cases, an individual reformer, a single country reformer, so to speak. Rarely have six countries agreed at the same time and formed a new organization called UNASUR, for reform. This is a historic movement since it really began, as we tried to point out, in the '90s. but it took strong shape after the coup in the 2002, the oil strike in 2003.

Chavez and Kirchner were the first ones really at this new beginning. And in the last six years, because their economies did prosper enormously, this thing has momentum. Never before has the United States had to scramble like this to defeat these new forces. And I say scramble because when I was down there with our group three weeks ago, Hillary Clinton was down there trying to scramble them the other way, trying to get them to fight amongst each other, trying to deny Chavez so that she could get back into-- we could get back into Bolivia and Ecuador. These are very important countries. Brazil is huge, but they will not be disunited. They do stick together. That was what was clear from this journey to me, especially.

In unity is strength and now the only way the United States will succeed is essentially to get them out of office democratically; hopefully, they will stick to the democratic process, which means financing, subsidizing elections, opponents, whatever they do in the terms of dirty tricks. And by the way, anything that Nixon did is certainly matched by what we have done in South America. Anything, any dirty tricks, we're right

up there. So we will stoop to many levels. And then, of course, if that doesn't work, if International Monetary Fund won't work, and they've driven out the International Monetary Fund, they cut that down from \$20 billion in loans to \$1 billion in loans, that's amazing. They've cut down-- we've charged them with terrorism, we've charged them with human rights abuses, the usual litany. We go after them again and again in media. But then when that doesn't work-- in the past-- that's when we go, I feel to the-- I know we go to the military option, which takes various forms of CIA and even military occupation.

**MR. BJERGA:** One point made in the film is the number of independent democratic elections that have been held in Venezuela in the past decade since Chavez took power. One election that was not specifically mentioned was the election where Chavez tried to extend the amount of time that he could be president. Now, he lost that election. But this audience member asks, how should an anti-authoritarian leftist feel about the continued accumulation of power by Chavez? The challenge to neo liberalism is inspiring, but recent events are troubling, the questioner asks.

**MR. STONE:** Very good question, and that's the most frequent question asked by the media in this country. And I think to really answer it in depth, I'm going to call on Mark Weisbrot to answer it because he studied this and he's really up to date. Mark?

**MR. WEISBROT:** Sure. Well, the question in terms of the referendum that was lost on the term limits in 2007, it had a lot of other-- there were a lot of other things on the ballot. And when that was placed on the ballot two years later, and it was just getting rid of term limits for all officials, it passed. So we can debate term limits. I mean, I'm from Chicago where I group up with only one mayor, and now his son is in office. So maybe I have a view that's colored by that.

But most of Europe doesn't have term limits, so there are arguments on both sides, for and against term limits. But I think the main thing is that there is democracy. The people voted in a democratic election to amend the constitution, to get rid of term limits not just for the president but for all offices. This was portrayed here in the press as some kind of-- some headlines actually said, "Chavez becomes president for life," even. And that's kind of an exaggeration. I think that's what we're talking about here when we talk about the way the media-- the way these things are presented here. You get a very different view than if you actually go there and see how it works.

So was there another part to that question that I didn't answer?

**MR. STONE:** Accumulation of power. He says I deal with accumulation of power.

**MR. WEISBROT:** Well, in Latin America, the state is very weak compared to the United States. So none of these presidents including Chavez have the kind of power that President Obama has in terms of getting anything done. And Rafael Correa of Ecuador actually said the *Washington Post* asked him, "Why are you trying to increase



the power of the executive?" And he made exactly that argument. He said, "People voted for change and it's impossible to get anything done if you don't have a stronger executive in my country." And I think that's true in all these countries.

And these are middle income countries, it's not Scandinavia. The rule of law is weak and there are a lot of problems. The impression that the *Washington Post* editorial board tries to give you every other week or so, that this is some kind of blow against democracy in Bolivia and Ecuador and Venezuela and sometimes they say Argentina, too. I think that's quite the opposite. What's happening is these are elected governments trying to deliver on their promises. They've delivered on a lot of them too. Ecuador doubled their spending on healthcare and increased all kinds of social spending. Bolivia got another 20 percentage points of GDP from their gas resources, which is the size for the last 40 years, at least, the entire federal budget of the United States. And they're using it.

Venezuela provides free healthcare. They vastly increased access to education. They've cut poverty in half. These are the statistics that-- by the way, they're accepted, the U.N. Economic Commission in Latin America, they just did a report two months ago showing-- they barely mentioned it, but it's there-- Venezuela is now the least unequal country in the Americas.

These are statistics-- and again, I don't want to just single out Venezuela because that's what's done here. What the film does is show all of these countries that have a common reform agenda, the common independence agenda that Oliver talked about. And they've had successes. And here, you really don't see that. You see that, again, it's always shown as a power grab of some sort. So if Venezuela takes control of its state-owned oil company, that's considered a power grab. But, standard public finances, if it's a government-owned company, the public should have control over it and that means the elected officials. It shouldn't be an independent entity.

And neither should the military, by the way. From the tradition that the Commander in Chief is a civilian, okay? Again, but when these countries, when these governments try to increase their civilian control over the military, that is also reported as a power grab. So I think these are movements towards democracy and I think it's very hard to argue the opposite.

**MR. STONE:** Tariq, would you like to add something?

**MR. ALI:** No. I agree with what Mark has said. On the question of unlimited terms, as long as you keep on getting elected, really it is a tactical issue. I mean, the more serious issue, which is raised in the film by Mr. Kirchner, when he says that, "Chavez is a great friend of mine, but I sometimes worry that he takes too much on." And that's a way of saying that building a team in Venezuela, a leadership, political leadership, which is less dependent on him, is extremely important. I mean, I've said this to Chavez himself, to his face. And I think that that is important because one person can't do it all indefinitely.

And that is something that they are trying to do, but it takes time because one of the problems they had was that quite a lot of the most educated, literate people in the country were opposed to them. The lighter skinned people, usually. I mean, I remember a conversation in Caracas very early on in the Chavez administration where people who were quite progressive on most issues actually said about Chavez, "Never trust a Zambo." I.e., someone of mixed parentage, native Indian and afro. That's what a Zambo is. So these prejudices go extremely deep in Venezuelan society. And often journalists who even go with good will to that country find themselves automatically gravitating towards East Caracas where the rich live and people who live on the same standards as many western journalists and much of the information comes from there.

I mean, Mark has analyzed it, I've analyzed it. In the reporting, for instance, of the coup in the *Financial Times* by Web Friedell (?) which was openly supportive of the coup, as was the *New York Times*. And that, on the one hand. And then on the other hand, when you have an election in Mexico, which a million Mexicans march into the streets and say it was rigged, and whether it's a lot of evidence that it was rigged, there's hardly any coverage because the person who it was rigged against is someone who was regarded as not being a friend of the United States. So these double standards really upset people in South America and not just there.

**MR. BJERGA:** We do have numerous questions to ask here, and thank you very much for your time and your responses. There's a reference made to weaker governments in South America not having the same powers as President Obama. One power that President Obama does not have is to shut down media outlets. And this question asks if Chavez is not a dictator, why do you think he closed RCTV and now is trying to take over Global Vision?

**MR. STONE:** Mark, would you please answer that because it needs to be very specific.

**MR. WEISBROT:** Yeah. Okay, well, the RCTV was denied a renewal of its broadcast license in 2007. And this is a station that would not get a broadcast license in the United States or in any democratic country. In fact, probably the owners would have been in jail if they had done what they did-- if it were in the United States because they actively tried to overthrow, and succeeded temporarily, in overthrowing the government in 2002.

So again, there are procedural problems, you know. You can argue that the broadcast license wasn't denied in a way that it would be in the United States. But, it's very hard to say that this is an undemocratic act. A broadcast license, as you all know, is not a right, it's a privilege. And in our country, we don't even step over the line. Like in 2004, when John Kerry was running for president and the Sinclair broadcast chain wanted to show a film against Kerry a few weeks before the election, what happened? The 18 Democratic senators wrote a letter to the FCC. Their broadcast license was somewhat threatened and they pulled the film.

And that's because even Fox News doesn't step over certain lines. Maybe now they're starting to, but-- what you see in Venezuela and you see the same thing in Ecuador and now in Argentina, there's a new media law because their government has the same fight. It's not about freedom of expression, it is a fight between the media, which is a political actor, the private media, which is still, by the way, the most important-- is still the vast majority of media in Venezuela and in all of these countries. It's a fight between them and these left of center governments. And again, I wouldn't defend everything that every government has done.

But the main thing I would say is that I definitely think they weren't entitled to the renewal of that broadcast license, by the way. And Lulu supported that publicly and there's no reason to think that a station that tries to overthrow the government-- and they did it more than even in the coup. They also did it during the oil strike in 2002 and 2003. They should not have access to the most prized piece of the broadcast spectrum. And I think that's completely justifiable.

Now, some of the other actions are not. But again, the thing that people here in the United States don't know, but It's obvious to you if you spend three days there in Venezuela, is the vast majority of the media, broadcast, print, measured by audience, radio, is against the government. It's opposed to the government in ways that are not permitted here in the United States. And so you have a very huge oppositional media. In spite of any actions that the government has taken, there's only really been a handful of such incidents over the last six or seven years.

Now, that's the reality. Now, within that reality I think there's plenty of room for debate and criticism. But people should at least understand the reality. These are not dictatorships. You ask anybody in this country, they think that Venezuela is a dictatorship and that people don't have free expression. And that's what's completely false and should not be propagated here in the United States because it leads to a misconception.

**MR. BJERGA:** We've had several questions dealing with human rights issues. In the film, you acknowledge that Hugo Chavez had a history of human rights violations, and then transitioned to the violations of Colombia without mentioning any of the violations by Chavez. Why was that? And more broadly, what is your perception of the government of Uribe in Colombia?

**MR. STONE:** On the human rights abuses, that again has to be addressed very specifically. So that part of the question, I'm going to ask Mark to respond. On the issue of whether we should have a relativity index, I do think it's necessary, as Mark said, in thinking about the United States issues and press censorship and where we are. Everything is relative in this world. Human rights abuses, every country in the world, except maybe Scandinavia, has human rights abuses of some kind, political prisoners mentioned, attacks made by Amnesty International. Personally, I would rather trust Amnesty than I would Human Rights Watch, but that's another matter.

But in this issue, there's no pattern of abuse. None in what I've seen and witnessed and read about. And the pattern is what you look for. Guatemala has a pattern, certainly Colombia has a horrible, horrible history. The paramilitary abuse has been covered in this country, not enough, but a lot of people are getting killed, Mexico, too. We know that reformers in these countries, and Honduras, too. By the way, since the coup in Honduras, since that last year and the United States did not do anything about that coup, we allowed it to continue, I'm told that seven journalists have disappeared. It may not be for political reasons, but people down there will tell you that there has been a chilling effect since this new government came in.

Every day, people are killed in Colombia and Mexico, reformers, the people who want a better life for their society, they're murdered. Recently in Guatemala a horrible murder. It never makes headlines here anymore because we're jaded about it. But if there were one murder in Venezuela, you bet it would be on the front page of every newspaper in the United States. That's what I call relativity index. That's what's lacking, a sense of proportion.

As to abuses, Uribe is gone, but Colombia is America's puppet. It's our Vietnam, it's our Afghanistan in that region. It's our hold on power. We have seven bases, we've contributed something close to \$7 billion to Colombia. We're resented for that. Colombia, it's a disgrace, what's going on there. It's a disgrace that they invaded Ecuador and they carry on a propaganda war against their neighbors. They are not liked. Mark, you want to answer the human rights abuses part of that question again? Or happy in what I said?

**MR. WEISBROT:** No, I think Oliver covered it pretty well. I mean, obviously there are human rights abuses in all countries in the hemisphere, including in the United States. But the thing, the only reason the human rights issue comes up in Venezuela in our discussions here, is because of the politics, okay? So Venezuela does not stand out as an abuser of human rights; quite the contrary, it's favorable to many. I mean, compared to Mexico where human rights workers are murdered and live in fear of their lives, again it's a middle income country. There are problems with the rule of law. There's a lot of impunity, even for murder, for street crime.

But there's freedom of speech, freedom of assembly. The opposition runs for office and they have most of the wealth and income of the country, still, so they're not that much at a disadvantage even though the government has the government and they have the advantages of incumbency, which are abused throughout the hemisphere.

So again, you can't really make a case. And yet, whenever you talk about Venezuela, all of a sudden there's a discussion about human rights. I guess here's an analogy I would give. There was a controversy here in the United States over our President having the right and actually exercising to target a U.S. citizen for assassination without judicial review. Now, I think that this is an abomination and it violates our constitution and all.

But I would never go out and try to convince somebody who maybe there are some people who know nothing about the United States, that we live in fear here. I'm afraid for my life here on this platform because I'm criticizing the United States. I'm not, okay? So that's, I think, what's kind of happened here. Is because nobody knows anything about Venezuela, people are able to take some kind of abuse and turn it into something that creates a completely false picture of what the society is actually like. And that's, I think, the best analogy I can give. If I were to actually try and convince people that because of this right the President has to target people in this way, and because of this violation of the constitution, that somehow dissent in the United States is repressed. Dissent is no more repressed in Venezuela than it is in the United States.

**MR. STONE:** Tariq?

**MR. ALI:** Just one point worth adding is that there have been, in September this year, when their parliamentary elections in Venezuela, this will be the 15<sup>th</sup> internationally monitored election in the country over the last 10, 12 years. They allow international monitors in, which Mexico didn't, by the way. They go, observe, they report, and they reports by and large are positive. I mean, once when Jimmy Carter went to observe an election, he said very, very openly, on television, he said, "This is the freest election I've ever witnessed." Now, whether he included the U.S. in that, I don't know. But he certainly said that. And that same evening when he was eating in a restaurant, in Caracas, some of the oppositionists were spitting at him and abusing him for having made that remark.

And what is not covered at all is the character of the opposition and some of the things they've been doing and saying. I mean, they have the right to say them, and they do say them, but very few other oppositions talk in that fashion about elected leaders. And Chavez has won these elections despite the hostility of an overwhelming majority of his own media, which say something. You know, he's constantly under attack. The same applies to Evo Morales in Bolivia. The entire Bolivian press and private television stations were attacking him saying, "Don't vote for him." But his supporters did vote for him. And that also shows that it's a very big repress. I don't know of any western country where someone's been elected with 95 percent of the media opposing them.

**MR. BJERGA:** Most broadly, what should U.S. policy be towards the South American nations whose leaders you interviewed? And during this trip to D.C., are you meeting with any government officials or lawmakers to push that message?

**MR. STONE:** I can only think of what they keep saying down there, Lula, Chavez, it's in the movie, "Mutual, mutual respect." Which is a key thought, mutual respect. Means equality. That has not been evident in the last century and before. The way we treat them, we condescend. As I said earlier, it's a unilateral world. We're the boss, we're the policemen and as long as we keep behaving that way in this world, and that's not just in South America, we are going to make enemies. We have many enemies and we will be threatened by those people. We will always be living in fear and in paranoia.

This is the lesson of my life. I saw it with Vietnam, I saw it in the Cold War when I was a young man. I see it again and again and again. We create enemies, we look for enemies. This military industrial complex led by people who are now being questioned here in Washington has grown out of all human proportion and distorted our foreign policy and our domestic policy to the place where we are going to choke on the excesses of our empire. Would you like to add something?

**MR. WEISBROT:** I think the idea of mutual respect is a big thing that came across. They don't want the United States intervening. The United States right now does not have diplomatic relations with Bolivia, for example. And one of the key issues holding it up is that USAID is financing a number of projects and they will not disclose fully what their projects are within the country. That's just been in the news in the last couple of days. So this is the kind of thing that the government feels is wrong. And, of course, we also have trade sanctions against Bolivia under the Andean Trade Promotion Drug Eradication Act. Again, these are the kinds of things the these governments understandably take as hostile. So I think mutual respect is a good summary of what they're looking for.

**MR. BJERGA:** We have a question that actually does not deal with South America or your film, but it may deal with experience and expertise. And it certainly is timely for the news of the day. You have been in and out of D.C. for years. You're also a combat veteran. Any perspectives you would like to share in the Stanley McChrystal episode?

**MR. STONE:** What is the denouement today? Is there something I don't know?

**MR. BJERGA:** I've been up here for an hour. There may be something we both don't know.

**MR. STONE:** I think it's inevitable. The Praetorian guard will take over the empire. There will be tensions between the two because our political goals are totally vague and confusing in Afghanistan, in Vietnam, in South America. What do we want? Do we want regional control? Do we want to control oil, do we want to control all the resources of the world? What do we want and how do we effect that? How do we live and let live and reduce our empire?

The McChrystals of the world will always tell you we can do something. Soldiers, and I was a soldier, it's a can do profession. I don't know soldiers who will not tell you, "We can't do it." So if you ask them, they're always going to say, "We can do it." They will hang in there until the bitter end, the very bitter end. It will be Afghanistan in 20 years, 10 years. The wars in America have gotten longer and longer. It'll be Mexico or Venezuela or Colombia. Why do we have seven military bases in Colombia? What are we doing in Colombia? When has there been a war in South America? When? Why do we have seven military bases there? What are they doing?

Why, for that matter, do we have military bases all over the world? I just don't understand it. It's gotten out of hand. And it has to do with money and money has controlled America. Our corporations are enormous. We have the Pentagon as the biggest corporation of all. We have Wal-Mart on the domestic retail front, we have super sized corporations that are way beyond our ability to control them. Monopolies are going to destroy capitalism. Capitalism, I do believe, and I did a Wall Street movie recently, it's coming out in September, I do believe it can work if it's reined in and regulated and it's more benign capitalism. It's these large monopolies, as Teddy Roosevelt warned us a long time ago, that are choking, choking the competition and the healthy side of capitalism.

**MR. BJERGA:** We are almost out of time. But before we ask the last question, we have a couple of important matters to take care of. First, to remind our members and guests of future speakers. On July 7<sup>th</sup>, tennis champion Venus Williams will be here addressing a luncheon. On July 16<sup>th</sup>, we have fitness consultant Tony Horton, author of the P90X home fitness system, addressing the nation's obesity epidemic and its impact on declining fitness levels among the U.S. military recruits.

The next day, on July 17<sup>th</sup>, the National Press Club will once again host its Press Club 5k, Beat the Deadline, benefiting the Eric Friedheim National Journalism Library. To register for the race, go to [www.press.org](http://www.press.org). And lest you think that this has been transformed into the National Sports Club, on July 27<sup>th</sup>, we will have Secretary of Education Arnie Duncan speaking here.

For our second item of business before the final question, we'd like to present our guest with, and now you have a matching set, the traditional and esteemed National Press Club mug. (Applause)

**MR. STONE:** Thank you.

**MR. BJERGA:** And now onto our final question, and I guess this is a question, not like any of the other questions put you on the spot, but I think this one definitely will. One of the issues in your film was the inability of some of the leaders you interviewed to get their messages across to an international audience in other parts of the world. The National Press Club would be happy to host any of the leaders that you interviewed for your film so that they may share their perspectives and tell their stories unfiltered to U.S. audiences and media. Next time you talk to those guys, could you put in a good word? (Laughter)

**MR. STONE:** I would certainly be glad to, and believe me, I've talked to all of them and I don't know any one of them who doesn't want to communicate with the American people directly. Thank you. (Applause)

**MR. BJERGA:** And a sincere thank you to you, Mr. Stone. And thank you all for coming today. I would also like to thank the National Press Club staff including its library and broadcast operations center for organizing today's event. For more

information about joining the National Press Club, and on how to acquire a copy of today's program, please go to our website [www.press.org](http://www.press.org). Thank you. This meeting of the National Press Club is adjourned.

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