

The Assassination of Richard Nixon

This movie's title is hopelessly misleading. Someone looking for a made-in-USA version of the *Day of the Jackal* should stay away. This is, rather, the story (based on a true incident) of how one sadly impotent American, Sam Bicke (Sean Penn) comes to lose so much that he has nothing left to lose, so that, like so many other cramped loners in our society, he strikes out at the highest authority he can think of. A much more pertinent title would be (stealing from a 1940's picture) *Crack-Up*.

Penn plays a thwarted, troubled soul, a naïf with little talent and large dreams who has alienated his own wife Marie (Naomi Watts) and family and can't hold a sales job because of a perverse kind of integrity. He believes *too much* in the American Dream, of which his own version is a "mobile tire service" which he hopes to launch with a small business loan. When that predictably fails (his business plan is infantile), he snaps and looks to an elaborate--and utterly implausible--assassination plan to redeem his own existence.

Sean Penn plays this baffled, pathetic figure to a T. For openers, he possesses the crumpled mouth and forlorn eyes that signal such a person, and to it he adds a halting, whining delivery that tells you the only direction to this life is down. Yet he has, oddly, a kind of stumbling integrity, a credulous belief in bedrock honesty, a genuine identification with the downtrodden (his only friend is a black mechanic played by Don Cheadle). It makes for a complex, anxious performance, and one which is hard to look away from.

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