



‘All About Nixon’

Famed Reporters Look Back at Watergate

By Matt L. Ottinger

The names Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward will forever be linked in American lore. While both went on to decorated careers in journalism, their tandem work in exposing the Watergate saga in the early 1970s shed light on a very dark undertaking by an American president. This illumination ultimately lit the course for the resignation of President Richard Nixon.

For the first time in 36 years (in June), the pair shared a byline on an article, which appeared in *The Washington Post* and outlined the dubious nature of Nixon’s tenure. On this 40th anniversary of Watergate, Woodward and Bernstein will speak at the Indiana Chamber of Commerce’s 23rd Annual Awards Dinner in Indianapolis on November 1. As a preview, the duo spoke with *BizVoice*® about Nixon, the American presidency and the state of journalism.

What are the lessons learned from Watergate that apply today? How has it changed the presidency?

Bob Woodward: “Because it’s been 40 years, it’s hard to say whether lessons were learned. I think they were for a while. At least in the late 1970s there was a deeper sense that activity concealment in the White House didn’t work. I’m not sure that lesson was absorbed in the eighties, nineties – and this time – to a certain extent. I think each administration has learned how to manage the information in the way they want.”

What type of message do you try to leave with audiences as you discuss the events of Watergate?

Carl Bernstein: “The idea is to convey that this was an event of huge significance in our history. With the passage of time, it needs to be understood both by the generation that experienced it and future generations. That involves putting aside some mythology that is bound to occur in intervening years and going back to look at exactly what happened in the Nixon presidency.”

Bob Woodward (left) and Carl Bernstein in *The Washington Post* newsroom in April 1973
(photo by Ken Feil/*The Washington Post*/Getty Images).

“With the tools of the last 40 years that were not available at the time we were reporting – especially Nixon’s own tapes – what becomes apparent is the events (plural) that became Watergate were of a much more grievous nature than what was apparent at the time. The criminality of the Nixon White House, of the president particularly, of his attitude toward the law, Constitution and free electoral system – even the majesty of what one would hope in the presence of democracy was absent.”

BW: (referencing the June article) ... “it’s quoted from the tapes; all of them to this day have not been transcribed, but you see the rage and hate that so often drove Nixon. (In the article,) we divided the efforts in his presidency by wars that began in 1969 when he took office. First was a war against the anti-war movement, then the war against the news media, which was aggressively reporting on the Vietnam War and the anti-war movement. The third war was against the Democrats, who were threatening Nixon’s retention of power through the democratic process.

“As (Bernstein) pointed out, they launched a sabotage and spying campaign against the Democrats that was very well-funded and very aggressive. It involved dozens of people and made sure Nixon ran against (George) McGovern (in the 1972 election) – a more desirable candidate than (Sen. Edmund) Muskie. The fourth war was against the system of justice, which was the cover-up and the obstruction of justice that so many people went to jail for. ... And the fifth war was the 20-year war against history by Nixon, to say it really didn’t happen the way it was documented ... saying Watergate wasn’t defining of his presidency, when the record shows it was.”

Could Watergate have happened at other times in history? Or were there certain factors in the early '70s (beyond Richard Nixon’s paranoia) that fueled the fire?

CB: “I think this really is about Nixon. Things happen in their own time as they happen. I think it’s hard to project questions of so-called ‘if history’ on big events. Have there been other abuses of power by other presidents and will there probably be in the future? Yes. On this kind of scale? Nothing that we know of, and we hope not. This was because of the mindset that Nixon brought to the presidency – what (Woodward) has called the ‘smallness’ of Nixon. If you listen to those tapes, you don’t hear the president of the United States talking about what would be good for the country. You

hear him talking on and on about how to screw people he thinks are his enemies or are perceived as his opponents. He’s using the office for retribution and revenge.”

BW: “I agree totally with (Bernstein) that this was Nixon-driven. If it was somebody that didn’t have this utter contempt for people with other views and, quite frankly, utter contempt for the rule of law, you wouldn’t have it. A background factor obviously was the Vietnam War – a war he inherited. But as you sort through the tapes, (you hear) his inability to come up with a withdrawal strategy. ... I think it

further enraged him that it wasn’t simple. He kept looking for a way to stay in, but get out. He kept looking for this concept of ‘peace with honor’ and that meant letting thousands more die in the war. If you look at the whole thing, it was an aggravating circumstance. Someone other than Nixon could’ve handled this, but obviously he did not.”

It apparently took a heavy partisan divide and mistrust to create a climate that could spawn Watergate? Is that divide even worse now? It seems as though Congress has come to a halt. How does this compare to the Watergate era?

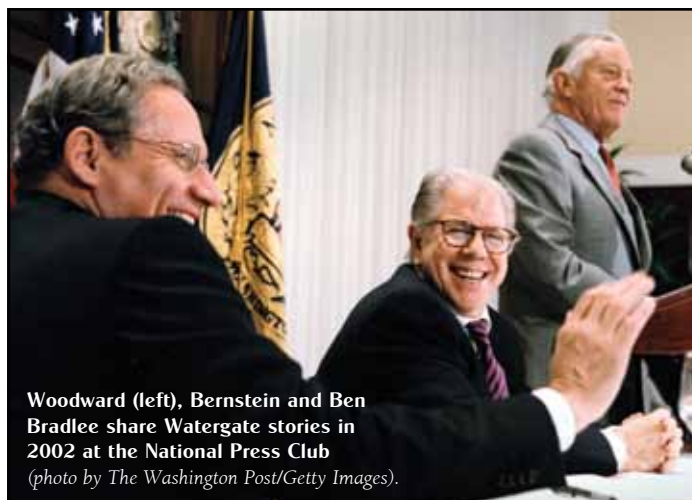
CB: “I don’t think there was. This was not about a partisan divide on ending the war. I think both parties were looking for a way to end the war. The question was, ‘How?’ I don’t think a partisan divide had to do with Nixon’s crimes or his approach to the presidency. In fact, in terms of how he came to leave office, there was a bipartisan approach and willingness that you don’t see today. When it came time for the Senate Watergate Committee to be created, there was a unanimous 77-0 vote in the Senate to undertake the Watergate investigation. It was a Republican senator (Howard Baker of Tennessee), who kept asking, ‘What did the president know and when did he know it?’ When it came time for articles of impeachment to be passed by the House judiciary committee, there was a group of Republicans whose votes were courageous and crucial in terms of joining Democrats to make this a bipartisan agreement – that this president had abused the office and committed high crimes and misdemeanors.

“Similarly, Nixon’s own appointments to the Supreme Court

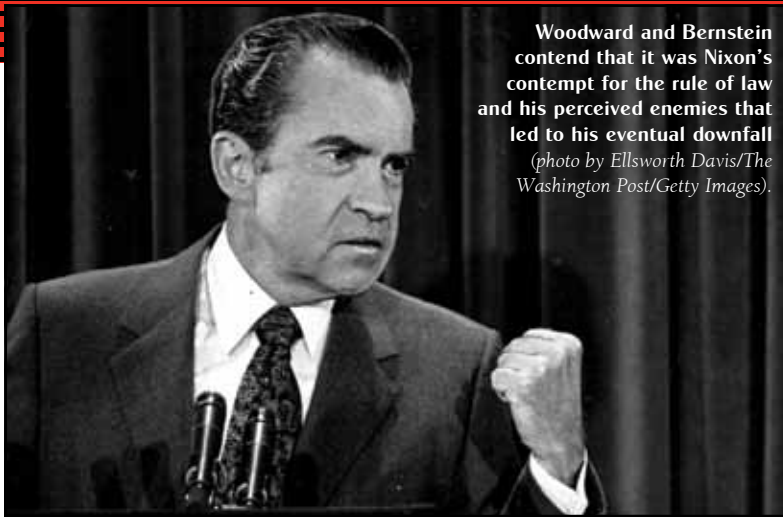


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– Bob Woodward



Woodward (left), Bernstein and Ben Bradlee share Watergate stories in 2002 at the National Press Club
(photo by The Washington Post/Getty Images).



Woodward and Bernstein contend that it was Nixon's contempt for the rule of law and his perceived enemies that led to his eventual downfall
(photo by Ellsworth Davis/The Washington Post/Getty Images).

were part of the unanimous decision (8-0 with one recusal) ordering the president to give up his tapes, which he was determined to hold on to. This was anything but an atmosphere of partisan warfare. Watergate was not about the Republican Party. It was about Nixon's re-election in terms of the espionage and sabotage committed against the Democrats ... it was an apparatus of Nixon's re-election campaign, which were his partisans – not party partisans – by and large.”

BW: “Just to stress that, after Nixon resigned, (Bernstein) and I went to see Barry Goldwater, the Republican senator who had gone to Nixon with other Republicans, saying it was over and he'd only get four votes in a trial in the Senate if he was impeached in the House. We sat in Goldwater's apartment; he gave us his personal diary, in which he laid out the history of his relationship with Nixon and his revulsion at the lies and the crimes. In many respects, the end of Watergate was a triumph for the Republican Party, saying, ‘We've got to not just distance ourselves from Nixon, but get him to resign.’ He had done something to the presidency that was unacceptable. (Bernstein) and I lived through that period, reporting on it from the Watergate burglary until Nixon resigned – so 22 months. And every now and then there was a partisan voice, but if you look at the history ... it was almost every time people in public office saying, ‘We have to connect ourselves to the high purpose of the offices we hold.’ The theme line here is accountability.”

While you were breaking the Watergate saga, did you have any clue you'd become arguably the most famous journalists in American history? How did that change your life? For better or worse?

CB: “We were thinking about covering the story at the time. We really weren't thinking in careerist terms. Obviously, we knew this was a great story, and all reporters get invigorated by a good story. I think it became apparent to us early on that there was a kind of awesome dimension to this, and the seriousness of it and what it meant for the country and the institution that we worked for, which was attacked every day by the Nixon White House.

To some extent, the survival of the institution became at stake as well. Even its financial stability in terms of how the White House responded, trying to make *The Post* and the conduct of the press the issue in Watergate, rather than the conduct of the president.”

BW: “If we ever taught a course in journalism school, the course would be in empiricism. What are the facts? The more fact-driven the press is, the better off. If you get into some sort of partisan inclination or stray from the facts and start saying, ‘This must mean that’ or ‘We can safely assume the following,’ as we know this doesn't often mean that, and ‘safely

assume’ is a phrase that just doesn't work in journalism. If you look back at what's in (the film) *All the President's Men* – our story of reporting this – we made mistakes when we got away from the empirical approach. We started connecting things and making assumptions because the story had so many elements to it and was so hidden and secretive for so long.”

The co-bylined piece that appeared in *The Washington Post*. What was it like to work on that after so many years?

CB: “It was like the old process. Learning from each other. Passing things back and forth. Discussing ideas. Agreeing on concepts, disagreeing on others. Push and pull, and it works.”

BW: “I found that it really was the first time we worked on something together in three decades. ... It takes more time, more drafts to hash it out between the two of us, but I suspect it makes a better product.”



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– Carl Bernstein

The newspaper industry has changed dramatically over the last 40 years? What needs to happen to keep it financially viable in the era of Internet news?

CB: “I don't think it's about necessarily keeping newspapers viable; there are some viable

newspapers. I think the real question is keeping institutions that report the news viable and effective and committed to a rather traditional conception of what is news. (Woodward) and I have said many times it's ‘the best obtainable version of the truth.’ It's a simple phrase, but it's a very difficult idea to achieve.

“It involves partly this empiricism (Woodward) has talked about, but also rejecting what has become an increasingly dominant agenda of the so-called media today – and what goes under the heading of ‘media.’ A diet of sensationalism and gossip and manufactured controversy, etc., and rather goes to the question of, ‘What is news?’ News is something that is about a search for truthfulness and especially involves context. It is not driven simply by speed and desire to make a splash, but rather a desire to illuminate, explain and understand and tell us what is going on in our businesses, sports, everything.”