

The Grand Cover-Up

By EDWARD JAY EPSTEIN

The film of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's book "All the President's Men" brilliantly articulates a particular view of American journalism. This view holds that news is accidentally divulged to persistent and resourceful reporters by sources that have no ulterior motive in releasing the information.

In the film, Messrs. Woodward and Bernstein piece together the puzzle by interviewing pretty secretaries who blurt out bits of information unintentionally, FBI officials who accidentally provide clues when their resistance is worn down, and a harried state's attorney in Florida who is not fully aware of the pertinence of the information he holds. By doggedly refusing to leave homes, by relentlessly hounding persons on the telephone and by issuing ultimatums to government officials, they succeed in wheedling the story out of witnesses who did not intend to disclose it. This accidental view of news is convenient, and indeed functional, to journalists who want to conceal the identity of sources and protect their relations with them.

The alternative view that information is deliberately leaked to journalists by sources with an interest at stake in the story would raise serious problems for journalists: It would suggest that the "leaks" are in fact plants, and that they are merely ammunition-carriers for the surreptitious authors of the story who are engaged in a power struggle.

Even for the best of reasons, if journalists represent news as being accidental when in fact it is deliberate, then they may willy-nilly assist in camouflaging the interest behind the disclosure, and thereby be part on a grander scale of the cover-up of an intra-government power struggle.

Consider the case of Woodward's most celebrated source, "Deep Throat." In the film, Mr. Woodward by accident stumbles on "Deep Throat," who then in a series of secret meetings in underground garages steers him in the direction of the White House. Neither Woodward, Bernstein nor the editors of their newspaper question the motives of "Deep Throat" in providing them with information; according to the accidental view of journalism, no ulterior motive is involved in high-level information disclosure.

Mr. Bennett's Role

While the circumstances in the film (and the book) surrounding "Deep Throat" may be fictionalized, Woodward in actual fact had at least one secret source who directed his attention toward the White House staff—Robert Foster Bennett, president of Robert E. Mullen & Co., who served the CIA by operating front organizations for them in several countries. Mr. Bennett also employed E. Howard Hunt as a "consultant" after he left the CIA and began working for the White House, and coordinated some of his activities both be-

fore and after Watergate. (Afterwards, for example, Bennett served as the go-between for Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy.) A number of Hunt's pre-Watergate activities could obviously embarrass the CIA, who supplied Hunt with equipment for his White House activities, and thus on July 10, 1972, Bennett explained to his CIA case officer, Martin J. Lukasky, who was debriefing him, that he planned to use, among other things, his connection with Woodward to divert public attention from the CIA.

The July 10th CIA memorandum describes in detail Bennett's plan to obscure the CIA connections to Hunt by establish-

The cover-up of behind-the-scene interest is the basic price journalists must sometimes pay for their scoops and Pulitzer Prizes.

ing a back-door entry to Edward Bennett Williams, the attorney for The Washington Post, and feeding stories which would focus attention on the White House (and Charles Colson in particular) to Bob Woodward, who was being, according to the memo "suitably grateful" in keeping the story away from the CIA. (Fred D. Thompson, the minority counsel for the Senate Select Committee, gives a fuller account of this memorandum in his book, "At That Point in Time.")

If Woodward and Bernstein had not concealed the interest behind this source, the film (as well as their reporting of Watergate) would have had to be different in some respects. The plot would show the chief officer of a CIA front group successfully manipulating news coverage of Watergate to conceal a set of covert connections by feeding stories about the White House to a grateful reporter. (Robert Redford could, of course, have replayed "Three Days of the Condor.")

To be sure, the convention of protecting important sources by concealing their identity encourages interests to supply journalists with important bits of information (since they can be assured that the interest behind the news will not be revealed). This convention, however, also tends to systematically mask the continuous power struggle within the government that produces these disclosures. This cover-up of behind-the-scene interests is the basic price journalists must sometimes pay for their scoops and Pulitzer Prizes.

The problem of concealing sources—and surreptitious interests—is more artfully managed by Woodward and Bernstein in their second book "The Final Days," which was published coincidentally with the release of the film of their first book. In their foreword, they explain that all interviews were conducted "upon our assurances that the identity of the source would remain

confidential." The device they use to accomplish this concealment is ambiguous attribution or even misattribution of direct quotes and inner thoughts of the principal figures of the Nixon administration.

When, for example, Mr. Kissinger is directly quoted as stating an opinion about Nixon, it does not necessarily mean that he actually said it to the authors. Indeed, if he did, they wouldn't be concealing the identity of the source as they promised in all cases. It could be a quote which any other individual is supplying the authors. The individual, who may be anyone from an aide to Mr. Kissinger or a bartender in Georgetown, may have heard the quote second, third, or tenth hand—or fabricated it. The authors claim they would have to have heard the quote from at least two individuals, which attests not to the provenance of the quote but the fact that it has been circulating in certain circles. Such data, of course, cannot be logically distinguished from gossip.

Damaging to Mr. Kissinger

Even when the authors divulge inner thoughts, one must presume that they are not necessarily attributable to the person allegedly thinking them. For example, the authors write, "Kissinger hated Rogers. He thought him stupid, inept, weak." As in the case of direct quotes, the authors claim to have at least two sources privy to Kissinger's thoughts and passions. But who? The parties who told the authors what the present Secretary of State was putatively saying and thinking about his predecessor are disguised—and the quotes and thoughts are represented as coming from Kissinger himself. Whether or not these quotes are accurate, they are damaging to Kissinger and the position of world politics which he advocates. Through his words and thoughts, he has been represented as a hysterical, unstable egotist.

Obviously, such a representation has political impact. If the sources were revealed, the interests behind divulging these representations would also become manifestly clear.

Even if every statement in the book is accurate—and none to date has been persuasively refuted—the brilliant concealment of the identity of the divulgers of information by the authors results in a cover-up of a power struggle in Washington that is much more important than any of the titillating disclosures in the book. To recognize this, journalists would have to recognize, as James Madison pointed out 200 years ago, that opinion is founded on interest.

Mr. Epstein is the author of two books on journalism, "News From Nowhere" and "Between Fact and Fiction," and is currently conducting a study of the national wire services for The Twentieth Century Fund.