The Watergate Watershed

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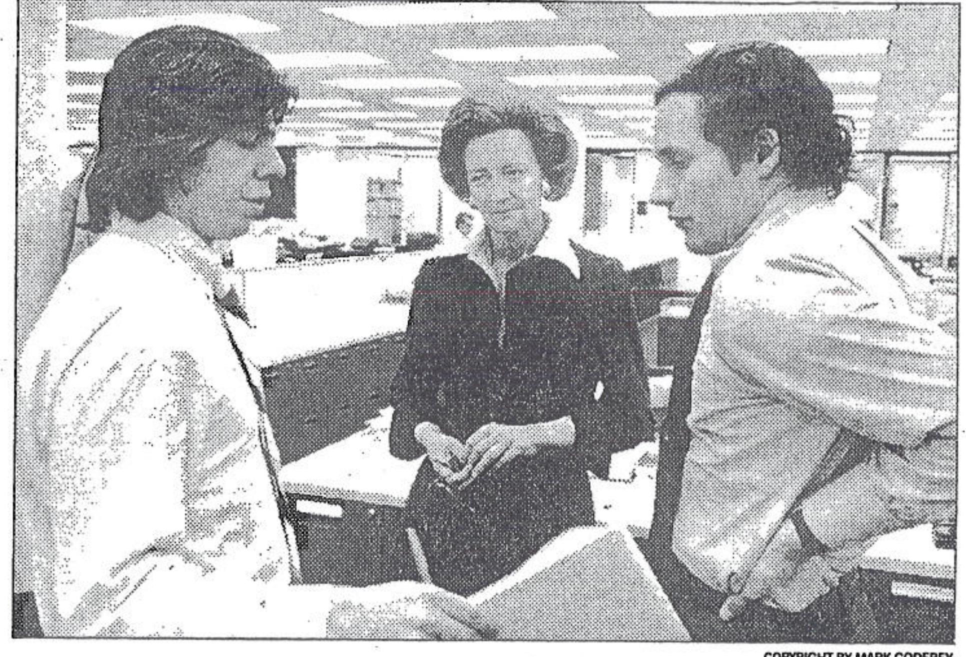
A Turning Point for A Nation and a Newspaper

By Katharine Graham

On Saturday morning, June 17, 1972, Howard Simons, The Post's managing editor, called to say, "You won't believe what happened last night." He was right. First he told me of a car that crashed into a house where two people had been



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Katharine Graham with reporters Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward in The Post's newsroom: "Is it all going to come out?" the publisher had asked at one point.

Personal History

making love on a sofa and went right out the other side. To top that, he related the fantastic story that five men wearing surgical gloves had been caught breaking into the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee at the Watergate office building.

President Nixon was in Key Biscayne, Fla., at the time. His press secretary, Ron Ziegler, dismissed the incident as "a third-rate burglary attempt," adding, "Certain elements may try to stretch this beyond what it is." None of us, of course, had any idea how far the story would stretch; the beginning—once the laughter died down—all seemed so farcical.

The story of the break-in appeared on the front page of Sunday's paper. Among the staff writers contributing to the story were Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. This was the beginning of their famous collaboration. Their first big story, over a month later, revealed the connection of the burglars to the Committee to Re-elect the President (CRP).

The Post was ahead on the story from the beginning. And from the beginning, Nixon began making threats of economic retaliation against the paper. "The Post is going to have damnable, damnable problems out of this one. They have a television station . . . and they're going to have to get it renewed. . . . [T]he game has to be played awfully rough." Of our lawyer, Nixon said, "I wouldn't want to be in Edward Bennett Wil-

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liams's position after this election. We are going to fix the son of a bitch, believe me."

Two weeks later, a seminal Bernstein and Woodward article appeared on Page 1 of The Post. They had dug up information that there was a secret fund at CRP that was controlled by five people, one of whom was then Attorney General John Mitchell, and which was to be used to gather intelligence on the Democrats. Thus the story reached a new level.

In an effort to check it out, Bernstein called Mitchell directly, reaching him at a hotel in New York, where Mitchell answered the phone himself. When Carl told him about the story, Mitchell exploded with an exclamation of "JEEEEEEESUS," so violent that Carl felt it was "some sort of primal scream" and thought Mitchell might die on the telephone. After he'd read him the first two paragraphs, Mitchell interrupted, still screaming, "All that crap, you're putting it in the paper? It's all been denied. Katie Graham's gonna get her tit caught in a big fat wringer if that's published. Good Christ! That's the most sickening thing I ever heard."

Bernstein was stunned and called Ben Bradlee at home to read him Mitchell's quotes. Ben told Carl to use it all except the specific reference to my "tit." The quote was changed to read that I was "gonna get caught in a big fat wringer." Ben decided he didn't have to forewarn me. (Later he told me, "That was too good to check with you, Katharine." I would have agreed with Ben's decision.) As it was, I was shocked to read what I did in the paper, but even more so to hear what Mitchell had actually said, so personal and offensive were the threat and the message.

It was quite a temper tantrum on Mitchell's part—and especially strange of him to call me Katie, which no one has ever called me. Bob Woodward later observed that the interesting thing for him was that Mitchell's remark was an example of the misperception on the part of the Nixon people that I was calling all the shots. In any case, the remark lived on in the annals of Watergate and was one of the principal public links of me with the affair.

Pressure Points

In October, the tempo of the whole story picked up. The Post printed an article that described the original break-in as part of a massive, nationwide campaign of political spying and sabotage conducted in behalf of the President's reelection efforts and directed by White House and reelection committee officials.

That day Ziegler began his morning briefing at the White House charging that "stories are being run that are based on hearsay, innuendo, guilt by association. . . . [I]t goes without saying that this administration does not condone sabotage or espionage or surveillance of individuals." That same afternoon, Clark McGregor, Nixon's campaign chairman, said that The Post's "credibility has today sunk lower than that of George McGovern," the Democrat running against Nixon.

During these months, the pressures on The Post to cease and desist were intense and uncomfortable. I was feeling beleaguered. Many of my friends were puzzled about our reporting. Joe Alsop was pressing me all the time. And I had a distressing chance meeting with Henry Kissinger just before the election. "What's the matter? Don't you think we're going to be reelected?" Henry asked me. Readers, too, were writing to me, accusing The Post of ulterior motives, bad journalism, lack of patriotism.

Nixon's campaign to undermine public confidence in The Post was intensifying. The investigation of such a tangled web of crime, money, and mischief was made much harder given the unveiled threats and harassment by a president and his administration. Bearing the full brunt of presidential wrath is always disturbing. Sometimes I wondered if we could survive four more years of this kind of strain.

I particularly loathed reports that personalized the whole dispute, implying that some sort of personal vendetta had poisoned the relationship between The Post and the administration. I had already begun to hear a chorus of rumors concerning my own feelings about Nixon, a chorus that warmed up with some help from Sen. Bob Dole, who made a charge, picked up and carried all over the airwaves, saying I had told a friend that I hated Nixon. Dole made the leap to saying that that was the reason The Post was writing all the negative Watergate stories.

Frozen Out

To no one's surprise, President Nixon was reelected by a landslide, with 61 percent of the vote and 49 out of 50 states—evidence of how little impact Watergate had had. However, instead of becoming more secure with his victory in hand and working to unite the country, Nixon immediately turned to vengeance and to strengthening his hold on power. In a speech at his victory dinner with members of the administration, he mentioned The Washington Post several times.

After the election, partly in response to the escalating campaign we felt was being waged against the reputation of The Post, I began to make more speeches defending the press in general and The Post in particular. One of the first big ones was in San Francisco. As my plane landed, the man across the aisle from me leaned over to say, "Hello, Mrs. Graham, can I help you with your bag?" I looked up into the eyes of Sen. Dole. He was very friendly, helped me off the plane, and did indeed carry the bag for me. We talked pleasantly, and I finally worked up my nerve to say, "By the way, Senator, I didn't say I hated Nixon." "Oh, you know," he casually replied, "during a campaign they put these things in your hands, and you just read them." His reaction amazed me, dismissing so lightly something that had had such a powerful effect on all of us at The Post, especially me.

That fall, at the same time that the administration granted an exclusive interview to the Washington Star, it started a boycott of sorts on us. We were not to have our calls answered, not to be dealt with professionally in any way; administration people were not to come to editorial lunches, and certainly not to my house for dinner. A uniquely ludicrous, petty and rather weird form of vengeance took place when the administration excluded our charming, much respected and even loved senior society reporter Dorothy McCardle, then 68 years old, from covering parties and made her sit alone cooling her heels in the pressroom, barring her from one social event after another. The strategy backfired, for Dorothy soon became something of a heroine to her colleagues in the Washington press corps. In fact, the Star gallantly ran an editorial supporting us and opposing the ban, stating that, if The Post couldn't cover the parties, the Star didn't want any favors; its social reporter, Isabelle Shelton, would join Dorothy in the pressroom, declining to attend the events as long as Dorothy couldn't.

We found out later that at one point Nixon had a plan to get Richard Mellon Scaife, the conservative Pittsburgh mil-

lionaire, to buy The Post. The evidence that turned up in the Nixon Archives was Ehrlichman's notes on a Dec. 1, 1972, meeting he had with Nixon: "Post. Scaife will offer to buy it. (Assets.) Suit by public SH [shareholders] if she (60%) [who controls this much of the A shares] refuses. President can't talk to him."

At one point, Nixon himself got in on the act. He sent a memo to Haldeman:

"Ziegler under no circumstances is to see anybody from the Washington Post and no one on the White House staff is to see anybody from the Washington Post or return any calls to them . . . —just treat the Post absolutely coldly—all of their people are to be treated in this manner."

Taking License

Of all the threats to the company during Watergate—the attempts to undermine our credibility, the petty slights, and the favoring of the competition—the most effective were the challenges to the licenses of our two Florida television stations. There were three separate challenges in Jacksonville and one in Miami, all of which—not coincidentally—were filed between Dec. 29, 1972, and Jan. 2, 1973. Out of more than 30 stations in the state of Florida up for renewal, our stations were the only ones challenged.

Did the White House actually encourage or even originate these challenges? In light of all the threats and memos that have since surfaced, it's easy to believe that Nixon and his co-conspirators were behind them, but we never found a paper trail leading to a direct connection. Maybe we didn't have to, so closely tied were many of the prominent figures to the White House or the CRP.

No doubt there was a mixture of motives among the challengers—the perception of blood in the water, easy pickings, and understandable thinking that the atmosphere was right given the Nixon-dominated FCC. There was also dissatisfaction, if not real dislike, on the part of some of the challengers for our strong, aggressive news organizations. We could see why some groups didn't like the performance of the two stations: Both had played a not insignificant role in the passage of Florida's corporate income tax and the Florida sunshine law.

Nixon's close friend Cromwell Anderson was one of the leaders of a challenging group in Miami. Another member was Edward Claughton, whose home Spiro Agnew had stayed in during the 1972 Republican Convention. Anderson

FILE PHOTO—AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

Katharine Graham and Washington Post Editor Ben Bradlee leaving a Pentagon Papers hearing.

began to move against our station in Miami in September of 1972. This happened to be the same month Nixon (as later heard on the tapes) said that The Post would have "damnable, damnable problems" about our license renewals, a phrase that was censored when the tapes were first released by the White House.

The timing of these challenges made them potentially devastating, coming not only in the thick of Watergate but also just a year and a half after the Pentagon Papers and after the company had gone public with its stock.

Among the worst effects was the sharp decline in our stock price that naturally ensued, from $38 a share down to $28 in the first two weeks after the challenges, and continuing on down to $16 or $17, decreasing the value of the company by more than half. As for the direct effect on our finances, the legal costs of defending the licenses added up to well over a million dollars in the first 2½ years the entire process took—a far larger sum then than now for a small company like ours.

Catching a Break

By early 1973, I was growing increasingly anxious and thought I ought to meet with Woodward and Bernstein in addition to the editors. Surprisingly, to this point—seven months into the story—I had had hardly any contact with the reporters. So, on Jan. 15, Bob and Howard Simons and I sat down to lunch together (Carl was out of town). Characteristically, Bob went right downstairs to the newsroom afterward and made extensive notes about what we'd said—even going so far as to write down what we ate (eggs Benedict).

My apprehensions about the whole Watergate affair were evident. "Is it all going to come out?" Woodward reported that I asked anxiously. "I mean, are we ever going to know about all of this?" As Bob later wrote, he thought it was the nicest way possible of asking, "What have you boys been doing with my newspaper?" He told me then that they weren't sure all of it ever *would* come out: "Depression seemed to register on her face. 'Never?' she asked. 'Don't tell me never.' "

It was also at this lunch that Woodward told me he had told no one the name of his secret source, whom Howard Simons had dubbed Deep Throat, after the pornographic movie that was popular at the time. "Tell me," I said quickly, and then, as he froze, I laughed, touched his arm, and said that I was only kidding—I didn't want to carry that burden around. He admitted that he was prepared to give me the name if I really wanted it, but he was praying I wouldn't press him. This luncheon was reassuring for me—or at least I gave the appearance of being reassured—but I remained nervous.

The period leading up to the trial of the "Watergate Seven," which began on Jan. 8, 1973, had been extremely tense. Chuck Colson, the tough White House special counsel, was talking around Washington about going to our national advertisers or our investors. A Wall Street friend of mine, André Meyer, a man with administration contacts, called me and asked me to come to see him. When I did, he advised me to be very careful of everything I did or said and—just like in the movies—he warned me "not to be alone." "Oh André," I said, "that's really absurdly melodramatic. Nothing will happen to me."

"I'm serious," he said. "I've talked to them, and I'm telling you not to be alone." André never explained what his fears were based on. I lay awake many nights worrying, though not about my personal safety. The very existence of The Post was at stake. I'd lived with White House anger before, but I had never seen anything remotely like the kind of fury and heat I was feeling targeted at us now.

Finally, a series of events began to unfold in our favor. Three days after the beginning of the trial, Howard Hunt the former CIA agent who was operations manager of the Watergate break-in, pleaded guilty to six of the charges against him. Four days later, the other burglars followed suit. On Jan. 30, G. Gordon Liddy,a former FBI agent who, with Hunt, managed the Watergate operation, and James McCord, former CIA security chief and the senior of the five burglars,

were convicted, continuing to claim that no higher-ups were involved and that they had not received any money.

I was on a trip to the Far East in behalf of Newsweek International when Howard Simons phoned to tell me the stunning news that McCord had written a letter to Judge John J. Sirica charging that perjury was committed at the Watergate trial. McCord said that the defendants had been pressured to plead guilty and keep quiet, that higher-ups were indeed involved, and that "several members of my family have expressed fear for my life if I disclose knowledge of the facts in this matter." McCord agreed to tell what he knew about the original burglary in exchange for a more lenient sentence.

This was the first real break in the case: McCord's letter confirmed our stories. At the White House, several resignations were announced on April 30, along with John Dean's firing as counsel. Elliot Richardson, the new attorney general, was given the right to appoint a special prosecutor. Nixon came on television at 9 that night, and several of us, including Woodward and Bernstein, crowded into Howard Simons's office to watch the speech. It was one of those many times throughout Watergate when I just wanted to be at the paper with friends and in the thick of things.

Nixon resorted to his old formulas: "The easiest course would be for me to blame those to whom I delegated the responsibility to run the campaign but that would be a cowardly thing to do. . . . It was the system that has brought the facts to life. . . . a system that in this case has included a determined grand jury, honest prosecutors, a courageous judge, Judge Sirica, and a vigorous free press."

Tale of the Tape

At the next day's press conference, Ron Ziegler apologized to The Washington Post generally and to Woodward and Bernstein particularly for his earlier criticisms of their reporting. The next week, it was announced that The Post had won the Pulitzer Prize for meritorious service for its Watergate reporting.

But the Watergate affair was far from over. In July 1973, a seismic event occurred: In the course of his testimony before the Senate investigating committee, Alexander Butterfield, a Haldeman aide, revealed that there was a voice-activated recording system in the White House. Consequently, the vast majority of conversations the president had had in the Oval Office were on tape.

Without the tapes, the true story would never have emerged. After their discovery, people actually began waiting in the alley outside our building for the first edition of the paper. Everyone was now following the story.

By the summer of 1974 Watergate continued on its way toward an ending none of us could have imagined two years earlier. On Aug. 8, President Nixon announced that he would resign the next day.

Immediately after watching Nixon's departure speech, I returned to Martha's Vineyard, where I had interrupted my August vacation. I turned on the television and heard a voice referring to 'President Ford.' Then and only then did I experience pure relief. I actually felt a weight leave my shoulders. It was over.

My own role throughout Watergate is both easy and hard to define. Watergate no doubt was the most important occurrence in my working life, but my involvement was basically peripheral, rarely direct. For the most part I was behind the scenes. I was a kind of devil's advocate, asking questions all along the way—questions about whether we were being fair, factual and accurate.

I have often been credited with courage for backing our editors in Watergate. The truth is that I never felt there was much choice. There was never *one* major decisive moment when I, or anyone, could have suggested that we stop reporting the story. Watergate unfolded gradually. By the time the story had grown to the point where the size of it dawned on us, we had already waded deeply into its stream. Once I found myself in the deepest water in the middle of the current, there was no going back.

One of the final touches to Watergate occurred just after Nixon had left Washington. Bob Woodward came to my office with the most wonderful present—an old-fashioned wooden laundry-wringer. It was signed by the six editors and reporters who had worked throughout those years to keep the story alive—Bob and Carl, Ben Bradlee and Howard Simons, Harry Rosenfeld and Barry Sussman. It sits in my office still, over 20 years later.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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