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'Watergate': The Worst and Best of Times

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What a shameful and exciting episode it was. And it comes back tonight as still one helluva tale in "Watergate: The Secret Story," a two-hour special from CBS News at 9 on Channel 9 that kicks off, more or less officially, the 20th anniversary of the Watergate ordeal.

We should note up top that the program is a CBS News/Post-Newsweek production, and that it in-

cludes some mutual back-patting by CBS and The Washington Post. But fair-minded folk would have to admit the plaudits were earned; for a time there in 1972 and '73, The Post and CBS News were virtually alone in their pursuit of one of the most important news stories of the century.

Nobody seems to be clucking with glee either, or dancing on Richard Nixon's political grave. There are laughs in the show, and, once a

dull opening act is over, it zips along briskly. But there is also an unmistakable melancholy that so terrible a thing could have happened, something that engendered waves of cynicism about government that ripple to this day.

For Nixon himself, who showed such contempt for the trust placed in him and the high office he coveted, one hears less hatred than sympathy and fascination. "If I could

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have my wish of who I would like to talk to for 10 days, each of us full of truth serum, I would pick Richard Nixon," says Ben Bradlee, executive editor of The Post in the Watergate era.

The gathering of Watergate alumni includes many who worked for Nixon—old Romans convening to mull a Caesar's fall. While CBS recruited an admirable list of participants, the omissions are conspicuous: H.R. Haldeman, G. Gordon Liddy and John Dean among them.

That supermarket-tabloid title—"The Secret Story"—is something of a ruse. You don't really get much information that's both new and pertinent. Anchor Mike Wallace says, for instance, that the presidential cover-up really began one day after the burglary and not three as was thought. That's nice, but so what?

He makes quite a fuss about the

fact that Judy Hoback, a bookkeeper for the Nixon re-election campaign, is being interviewed on camera here for the first time, but all Hoback really recalls is a visit from reporter Carl Bernstein, who, with Bob Woodward, was half of what became the most famous reporting team in history.

CBS has promised that late in the program, an "educated guess" will be made about the identity of Deep Throat, the shadowy source who led Woodward through much of the merry Watergate maze. This portion of the program was withheld from the preview copy supplied by CBS. Wallace says three names often cited as possible D.T.'s can be eliminated based on Woodward and Bernstein's writings and remarks: Alexander Haig, Henry Kissinger and Melvin Laird.

It is kinda wonderful, as Bernstein says at one point, that any secret

could have been kept for 20 years, especially a Washington secret.

Young viewers who can be induced to watch will get from "The Secret Story" a sobering insight on the enormity of the crime, a splendid case study on the abuse and arrogance of power, a still-shocking profile of the rottenest administration ever. The lessons are bitter and obvious: "It could happen again just as surely as it did 20 years ago," says Wallace.

Sam Dash, chief counsel to the Watergate subcommittee, compares political corruption to cockroaches in the kitchen. "You know, you can spray once and they'll be gone for a while, but the damn roaches keep coming back again," he says.

Many memory-stirring names, faces and phrases return: the Oval Office tapes and their 18½-minute gap; dirty tricks; the "Saturday night massacre"; folksy Sam Ervin, who ran the Senate subcommittee; "Well, I'm not a crook" and "unindicted co-conspirator." We see again Dan Rather's exchange with Nixon at a press conference staged at a broadcasters convention—Rather getting applause, Nixon asking him if he's running for anything, Rather replying, "No, Mr. President, are you?"

It's a nostalgia show, in a way; you may find yourself getting perversely sentimental. The fact that so many of the wrongdoers now appear repentant, chastened and humbled is reassuring. Just seeing how time has changed once-familiar faces somehow is too.

Walter Cronkite confirms to Wallace that the late William S. Paley, founder of CBS, assailed his own news division over Cronkite's first big, brave Watergate report, Paley having been pressured by Nixon hatchet man Chuck Colson. "All good work is done in defiance of manage-

ment," Woodward says, though we certainly hear no talk of Post management wavering as Paley did.

The program, impeccably executive-produced by Andrew Lack, covers all the bases, or virtually all, but lacks any taint of perfunctory anniversaryness. Some of the punctuating shots of Washington landmarks are quite beautiful, and make their own grim commentary on the sordid spectacle that unfolded around them. And you sure couldn't ask for a better, abler man in the interviewer's chair than Wallace, easily as good as he was 20 years ago when he questioned Colson for "60 Minutes."

During that interview, Colson recalls, Wallace asked him how he could square his misdeeds with his avowed Christianity. Colson says it was that question that inspired him



Reporter Bob Woodward, left, and anchor Mike Wallace in the compelling "Watergate: The Secret Story" tonight on CBS.

to change his plea to guilty, against his lawyer's wishes.

The presidential election ahead is going to bring, and already has brought, new attacks against the media—"The press is out to get me," "My remarks were taken out of context" and all that. Journalists can be as arrogant as politicians, but re-wallowing in Watergate puts some of that constant whining in proper perspective.

Naturally the old cliché about the system working comes up. One is inclined to say rather that this was a case in which the system by some miracle managed to squeak by. But then, where do miracles come from? If divine providence had as much to do with revealing and unraveling the scandal as Woodward, Bernstein and Deep Throat did, and cared enough to intervene, that is reassuring too. We remember Watergate to our glory, not only to our sorrow.