

Essay

# Journalism's Finest 2 Hours And 16 Minutes

Savoring the Truth in the Film  
Of 'All the President's Men'

6/17/92 By Ken Ringle  
Washington Post Staff Writer

**I**t changes names, alters facts, eliminates crucial historical figures and mythologizes others. It over-glamorizes reporting, oversimplifies editing and makes power appear the only proper subject for a newsmen's pen.

But 20 years after Watergate, "All the President's Men" remains the best film ever made about the craft of journalism and an eerily accurate evocation of the mood and psychology—if not the details—of that byzantine presidential deceit and its unmasking.

For those of us who lived through those draining, mesmerizing, pulse-racing days within these walls a generation ago, there's both wonder and discomfort in that realization. Wonder because few of us ever hoped for as three-dimensional a portrait from Hollywood; discomfort because most journalists in those days thought of themselves as chroniclers of events, not major players. To revisit the 1976 film is to be reminded how much in our profession—and our building—the film helped change, not always for the better.

If "All the President's Men" brought a kind of final public absolution to a Washington Post economically battered and publicly reviled by the Nixon White House, it also brought an institutional self-consciousness

See ESSAY, G10, Col. 1



**Front, from left: Carl Bernstein and his movie counterpart, Dustin Hoffman. Rear, from left: Ben Bradlee and his counterpart, Jason Robards, and Howard Simons and his counterpart, Martin Balsam.**

# Watergate

ESSAY, From G1

distinctly disquieting to the once free-swinging journeymen and women of the fourth estate.

We may not have been a better paper before Hollywood discovered us, but we were probably less pompous and we certainly had more fun.

Little of that fun is evident in the movie, of course, which makes journalism out to be such a humorless, single-minded—though vaguely glamorous—calling that it subsequently attracted to the profession legions of humorless, single-minded young people vaguely in search of glamour. Once they would have all become lawyers.

The factual deficiencies of "All the President's Men" are all too obvious to people obsessed with details, as journalists tend to be. The most grievous example is the dramatic absence of City Editor Barry Sussman, who played a vital role in helping reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein piece their discoveries into a meaningful pattern but was entirely written out of the film, just as if he never existed.

Likewise, the analytical role of the late How-

ard Simons, the Post's much-loved and resourceful managing editor 20 years ago, is trivialized almost to idiocy by William Goldman's screenplay and by a befuddled performance by actor Martin Balsam. Yet Simons was from first to last the senior editor most involved in the day-to-day progress of the Watergate story.

Other small events are rearranged, names changed, characters combined or fictionalized, all by people so purportedly obsessed with "authenticity" that they spent tens of thousands of dollars duplicating the Washington Post newsroom, right down to the labels on the filing cabinets, then shipped genuine Washington Post trash to Hollywood to clutter its desks.

Dialogue and incidents throughout the news-gathering process were manufactured or exaggerated. Only the discoveries themselves remain wholly authentic.

The most gratuitous visual inaccuracy in "All the President's Men" is the repeated depiction of Woodward and Bernstein laboring alone in an empty newsroom.

The truth is that almost everyone in the newsroom (if not the building) from the humblest copy aide to publisher Katharine Graham, who regularly dropped in to show support, became swept up in the Watergate coverage: staying late, fielding queries, passing along tips and offering assistance. It was almost involuntary: We were part of the paper and we knew what was happening and nobody believed us. It was like being in combat together.

Nobody did a tenth as much as Woodward or Bernstein, of course, but everyone, it seemed, contributed something, if only by remembering seemingly inconsequential past incidents that took on new meaning as the story unfolded.

There are countless examples of such dramatic license in the film "All the President's Men" and both as viewers and as journalists we can probably thank God there are. For few of us thought it possible to fashion from the tangled opacity of the Watergate scandal a film even remotely watchable by those outside the ranks of the politically obsessed. After all, there were more than 40 people involved in the Nixon administration alone—so many the book version of "All the President's Men" needed the cast of characters listed on the opening pages.

The supreme triumph of Goldman's Academy Award-winning screenplay is the way it slices through that kelp bed of interlocking relationships and, quite literally, cuts to the chase.

The viewer hears no more of the dozens of names involved than he needs to know, learns no more about each than he absolutely must. Instead, he is swept from one point in the story to the next by the reportorial process of discovery, whose techniques are incomparably conveyed, and by the pressure the young reporters feel—first the pressures of competition, then the pressures of production, finally the pressures of fear and actual physical danger.

It was actor-producer Robert Redford, be-

fore Woodward and Bernstein, who first saw in the scandal not the political *Goetterdaemmerung* that transfixed Washington but a Hitchcockian detective story of pursuit and unseen menace. That insight is magnified by director Alan Pakula's masterly use of mazes and shadows to mirror the tortuous paths and hidden truths the reporters encounter along the way.

Time and again, most noticeably in a stunning keystone shot at the Library of Congress (it cost \$90,000 for 30 seconds of screen time), the camera slowly draws back from a close-up to show the reporters or their cars dwarfed by the vast mazes of the nation's capital in which they search.

Time and again, a source lurks fearfully in the shadows and has to be lured into the light. The parking garage where Woodward meets his famous anonymous source, Deep Throat, is the ultimate visual labyrinth: a maze of shadows. It echoes with danger, but those echoes are answered elsewhere in the film by the sounds of the reporters' typewriter keys. In the film's opening frames they reverberate like gunshots.

Pakula wisely keeps his Nixon administration villains offscreen—their power and inaccessibility hinted at by television images or by a voice on a telephone or by the opaque windows of darkly sinister limousines. Despite exceptional performances by Redford, Dustin Hoffman as Bernstein and Jason Robards as Post Executive Editor Ben Bradlee, "All the President's Men"

is largely carried by such nuances, by what it suggests and portends more than by what it says. And if you want to see what a preachy disaster it could have been, view it alongside Oliver Stone's flatulent historical travesty "JFK."

Unhappily, those who make their first acquaintance with "All the President's Men" on videotape will be greatly shortchanged. In order to squeeze it onto a single cassette, great editing minds at Warner Home Video guillotined 11 minutes of Pakula's artistry, and the resulting 127-minute film, though still powerful, is seriously diminished.

What's missing is mostly nuance, but it's vital, particularly to Robards's Oscar-winning portrait of Bradlee. Gone are many of Robards's most eloquent long looks—angry, thoughtful or frustrated. Gone is his swaggering late-night exit from the newsroom, The Post's first edition slapping his thigh.

Gone also are many of the telephoning sequences that underline the drudgery and imprecision of a reporter combing a list. Gone is Hoffman as the ultimate Carl Bernstein, pleading with a phone company official for people's telephone records while insisting he hates to violate personal privacy.

But what survives endures, warts and all, as an extraordinary motion picture. Twenty years after the fact, it's still a remarkable portrait of Washington, and of journalism doing the very most that it can do.