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STYLE

The Arts

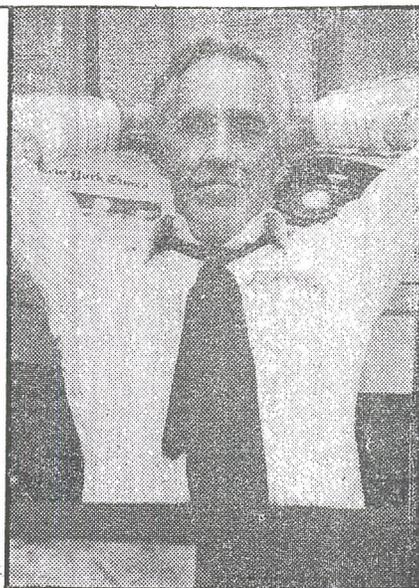
Entertainment

SUNDAY, APRIL 4, 1976



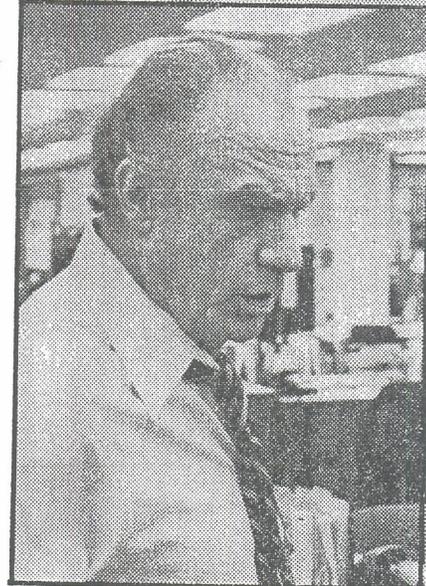
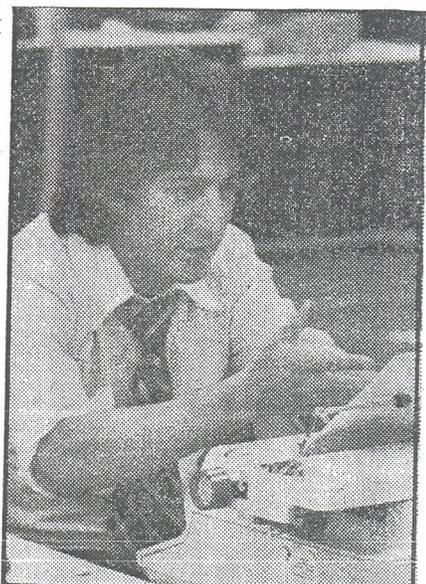
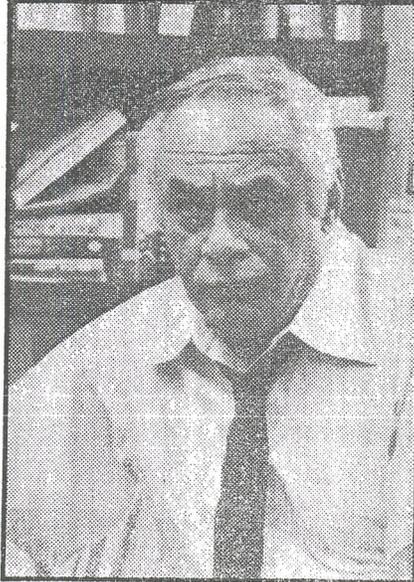
SHOW

K 1



Newsroom scenes, clockwise from upper right: Robert Redford as Bob Woodward, Jason Robards as Ben Bradlee, Martin Balsam as Howard Simons, Jack Warden as Harry Rosenfeld, Dustin Hoffman as Carl Bernstein, and Redford... Warden, Robards and Hoffman in conference.

Warner Bros. Photos



'President's Men': Absorbing, Meticulous . . . and Incomplete

By Gary Arnold

Robert Redford's last movie, "Three Days of the Condor," was a political espionage thriller that closed with an expression of faith in the integrity of the American press, symbolized by The New York Times. Or, to be precise, The New York Times *Building*. The tribute couldn't have been more sincere, but at least in Washington it struck audiences as inadvertently funny. Any hip moviegoer realized whose turn was next.

For all practical purposes, the conclusion of "Condor" was a trailer for Redford's next project, the movie version of "All the President's Men," the best-selling memoir by Washington Post investigative reporters Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward. That gratuitous parting salute to the Times was about to blossom into a full-scale salute to The Post during its Finest Hour, the pursuit of the story behind the "third-rate burglary attempt" at the Watergate offices of the Democratic National Committee in the wee hours of June 17, 1972.

And blossom it has, in both irresistibly attractive and mildly disappointing respects. "All the President's Men," which opens Wednesday at the K-B Cinema and MacArthur following a world premiere benefit showing tonight at the Kennedy Center's Eisenhower Theater, is an engrossing and enjoyable cinematic digest of the Woodstein chronicle, distinguished by a meticulous reproduction of the environment of the Post newsroom, an extraordinary measure of interest in (and open admiration for) the working methods of professional newsmen, and astute impersonations of Woodward, Bernstein and executive editor Ben Bradlee by Redford, Dustin Hoffman and Jason Robards, respectively.

Nevertheless, there's something emotionally limiting about the modest, careful, smooth craftsmanship with which the original material has been transposed to the screen. This approach verges on being meticulous to a fault. It leads to an absorbing movie that somehow fails to evolve into a rousing, dramatically satisfying movie as well. "All the President's Men" lacks an expansive vision and an elemental spark of showmanship and inspiration.

Any film adaptation of a book as eventful and heavily populated as "All the President's Men" is bound to involve a considerable amount of foreshortening and transposition. In the process of condensing this material, the filmmakers have left themselves with a compact and fairly intelligible continuity, but it's a continuity without a dramatic shape, a serviceable outline rather than a stirring narrative.

The crucial misjudgment may be cutting off the scenario at roughly page 200 of a 336-page book. The movie ends in the wake of President Nixon's reelection, the beginning of a long dry spell for Woodstein and a nervewracking period of the Post's management, which found itself the target of several White House reprisals, the most absurd being the exclusion of reporter Dorothy McCordle from the press pools covering White House social events. The film shows us Redford and Hoffman typing diligently in the background while the President's triumph is glimpsed on a television set in the foreground. In a rapid epilogue we watch a series of leads rattle off the teletype, updating the Watergate saga to Nixon's resignation.

See APM, K5, Col.1

The visual and rhetorical flair of this denouement seems like a thin substitute for the emotional satisfaction that could be derived from extending the scenario to include the paper's vindication in the spring of 1973, when L. Patrick Gray's testimony at his confirmation hearings and James McCord's letter to Judge Sirica finally brought the Watergate cover-up out of the shadows. Unlike the book, which conveyed the impression that Woodward and Bernstein were riding an emotional roller coaster, the movie has no ups and downs, no highs and lows. Director Alan J. Pakula maintains such a level, quasi-documentary low key tone that one's feelings about this highly charged chapter of contemporary history never get out of neutral.

Pakula and Redford are reserved types to begin with, and it would be inappropriate to turn "All the President's Men" into a rabble-rouser. Still, this film is controlled by a quality of reserve that is virtually anti-dramatic. It's as if the filmmakers were so wary of corny or manipulative touches that they shied away from authentic and legitimate dramatic opportunities as well.

It might have seemed a little corny to end the film on a scene of triumph, but as a matter of fact, there were such scenes in the spring of '73. A truthful rendering of one or more of them would not have violated reality or history, and it would not necessarily be pandering to the audience to let them share the surge of feeling that people at the Post felt after the siege was lifted. For example, here's a moment of elation with a nice kicker, on the day Haldeman and Ehrlichman left the White House, excerpted from an article that appeared in *The Columbia Journalism Review*:

"Bradlee couldn't restrain himself. He strode into the Post's vast fifth-floor newsroom and, shouted across rows of desks to reporter Bob Woodward, 'Not bad, Bob! Not half bad!' Howard Simons interjected a note of caution: 'Don't gloat,' he murmured, as Post staff members began to gather around. 'We can't afford to gloat!'"

An even more interesting effect might have emerged from Bradlee's announcement to an elated newsroom of the Pulitzer Prize for the Post's Watergate coverage. The complicating factor here was the initial anger felt by Woodward and Bernstein at the news that Bradlee had lobbied for an award made to the paper rather than the reporters exclusively. He persuaded them it was the right move after all, but the clash and acceptance would have made some points about human vanity, professional pride and the heady effect of celebrity that are beyond the scope of the film as presently conceived.

In a way it seems futile to criticize filmmakers for what they've chosen not to depict, but the point is that this neglect often deprives movies of an

indispensable element—human interest. Within the stylistic limits and shortened time span the filmmakers have decided to use, "All the President's Men" is an exceptionally well-made film. It's simply impossible to suppress the feeling that a more involving and satisfying movie would have emerged from a less restrictive framework.

One of the ironies of the situation is that the filmmakers seem to have shortchanged the dramatic potential in the story out of a sense of fidelity to the reporters and editors they wanted to honor. It's almost as if Pakula and Redford were applying reportorial criteria to the process of film dramatization. They keep it tight and dry and don't indulge in many cinematic equivalents of "vivid writing."

It's amusing to see that the early suspicions of Post personnel about the movie personnel have proved unjustified. If anything, the film people may err on the side of excess deference. Woodward and Bernstein criticized their own blunders with a passion and consistency that is never remotely approached in the movie. Indeed, their willingness to underline their mistakes was one of the most appealing aspects of the book.

The abbreviated time span of the movie makes it impossible to include the most disreputable slip-up—the attempt to pump members of the Watergate grand jury for information, a ploy that tossed the reporters temporarily into hot water with Judge John J. Sirica. I'm not sure the film ever does suggest how desperate the paper got at certain junctures, either because no information was breaking or a scoop had been scored elsewhere. For example, in an effort to overcompensate for a Los Angeles Times exclusive with Alfred Baldwin, the ineffectual lookout man on the night of the break-in, Woodward and Bernstein ended up writing a story that implicated the wrong people. This incident did occur within the film's time span, but it wasn't used.

The foreshortening process has been drastic enough to make one uncertain about the film's overall dramatic effectiveness. Since the movie's chronology is fragmentary and leaves several loose ends dangling about, it may be best to regard the picture as a series of highlights from the Watergate file.

The sharpest bits are the reenactments of those stunning, funny moments of discovery: Woodward calling the White House to inquire about Howard Hunt and being helpfully directed to Colson's office; Woodward trying to straighten out the mystery of the \$25,000 check with the distressed Kenneth Dahlberg; Bernstein arousing John Mitchell, who responds with his immortal threat about "Katie Graham" and "a big fat wringer."

Curiously, the Mitchell outburst



Warner Bros. Photo

provides the only reference to Mrs. Graham in the film. At some stage she was eliminated as a character, and the elimination obscures the fact that The Washington Post had a publisher who was also a highly interested party in these conflicts. One is left with the slightly distorted impression that all authority flowed from Ben Bradlee. It's very tricky trying to make the distinction between a publisher's role and an executive editor's role in this situation, because they virtually had to trust each other, just as they had to trust the reporters, but it would only be fair to incorporate a line or two illustrating the fact that the commitment was mutual.

The filmmakers have followed up the Mitchell conversation with a Bradlee anecdote that belongs to a later stage of the story, his account of how he was double-crossed by President Johnson after being fed the scoop that J. Edgar Hoover was about to resign. Bradlee actually recalled this sting in the spring of '73, when the reporters learned that Ehrlichman and Halde- man were on the way out. It's a swell anecdote that doesn't quite work out of context. In fact, the aftermath of the Mitchell business would have

been the appropriate time for one of Bradlee's characteristic tributes to Mrs. Graham: "She's got the guts of a burglar."

Jason Robards may be on screen for no more than 10 minutes, but 10 minutes of Ben Bradlee looms disproportionately large, since he's the most vivid and emphatic character on the premises. Bradlee is a natural, and Robards has captured him to a T, but the sheer clarity of this impersonation tends to underline the perfunctoriness of the roles of other editors.

Martin Balsam as managing editor Howard Simons and Jack Warden as former metropolitan editor (now national editor) Harry Rosenfeld walk skillfully through roles that relay necessary pieces of exposition. They're asked to be functionaries rather than distinctive personalities. The Rosenfeld role is the more unsatisfactory, since it represents a token effort to combine aspects of Rosenfeld and Barry Sussman, the former city and special Watergate editor who worked most intimately and extensively with Woodward and Bernstein.

Of all the filmmakers' real and imagined derelictions, the elimination of Sussman as a character was the one

that bothered Post staffers most. Indeed, it has proved a more serious drawback than one might have guessed, because the picture needs a ruffled, avuncular, dogged editorial type to contrast with Robards' flamboyant Bradlee and to supply some lucid updating and recapping of information as we go along. I suppose it was unthinkable, but it appears to me that the supersource, "Deep Throat" might be more expendable.

Hal Holbrook's shadowy appearances as "Deep Throat" are at once so brief and neurotically loaded that the book's intimations of a genuine friendship remain unexpressed. On screen "Deep Throat" turns into a scolding Cassandra, a distortion that makes a Sussman substitute appear even more essential. To become a satisfying after-the-fact whodunit "All the President's Men" requires some kind of contemplative, consulting detective type with whom the heroes could trade theories and evaluate evidence every so often.

As written, the roles of Woodward and Bernstein are not major acting challenges. We learn very little about the reporters in a personal, nonprofessional sense. It's the way they work, combined with our awareness of what was at stake in this particular Big Story, that sustains a fairly consistent level of interest and suspense. If anything, the stars are more self-effacing than you're prepared for. They shade the roles intelligently — an extra hint of watchfulness and persistence from Redford, an extra hint of restlessness and nervous energy from Hoffman — but they don't try to dominate the conception, which stresses methodology rather than characterization.

One doesn't emerge from the film with an ambivalent set of impressions about Woodward and Bernstein. They get a little devious now and then, but invariably it's all in the line of duty. The movie has done a pretty thorough job of eliminating the incidents in the book that appeared to weigh upon their consciences, such as the grand jury caper. As a matter of fact, the showiest instance of ungentlemanly behavior is a piece of hokum: they con a woman reporter into securing a list of CRP employees from an estranged boyfriend; according to the book, this list came into their possession without benefit of hanky-panky.

The irony is that these characters are so self-evidently on the side of truth and justice that it wouldn't have hurt to suggest a few vanities and imperfections here and there. Given the rather mechanical quality of the script, it's a blessing that the roles have gone to actors one likes on sight. Their natural, unaffected playing gives us an immediate feeling of complicity and assurance. Rooting for the good guys will do very well under the circumstances.

"All the President's Men" is probably the most eagerly anticipated film

attraction since "Jaws," and it's a shame that Pakula, Redford & Co. couldn't have borrowed a structural trick or two from "Jaws." The constant opposition of apprehensive moods and deadpan humor might have been the most entertaining way to stylize the Woodstein material at this stage of the game. While the Post had legitimate reasons to fear the Nixon administration, it won't quite do to look back in fear and trembling.

After all, the good guys won, and I wish Pakula's film reflected a keener taste for the lighter side of the struggle. There's just no room in this conception for such sidelights as the Post spending \$5,000 to see if the office had been bugged (it was clean) or Bernstein ducking a CRP subpoena at a showing of the original "Deep Throat" and then getting served a subpoena by a kid who turned out to be a Woodstein fan. Pakula permits himself a few funny scherzos, notably Hoffman's caffeine high after his return from interviewing a CRP bookkeeper, very well played by Jane Alexander. If only he'd indulged himself a bit more!

A number of political commentators seem to feel that "All the President's Men" will have a far-reaching political impact this year. I'd be more inclined to believe it if the film affected a provocative emotional tone. Pakula is just too cool under the collar.

It appears the film has already liberalized the ratings system, making the most famous sexual four-letter word of them all (and its variations) acceptable for the PG classification as long as it isn't spoken in a sexual context. The chances seem to get even better if the word pops up as part of an authenticated historical quote. In the case of "APM," most of the relevant quotes originated with Ben Bradlee, now emerging as a linguistic liberator as well as a movie legend and fighting editor. The case for flexibility in this area makes sense, and after the MPAA reviews its guidelines, one may anticipate revisions of such inflexible misclassifications as the R on "Harry and Tonto." Onward and upward, slowly but surely.

"ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MEN." Produced by Walter Coblenz. Directed by Alan J. Pakula. Screenplay by William Goldman, from the book by Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward. Director of Photography, Gordon Willis, A.S.C. Production Design by George Jenkins. Editing by Robert L. Wolfe. Music by David Shire. A Wildwood Enterprises Production. Released by Warner Bros. Prints by Technicolor. 140 minutes. MPAA Rating: PG.

THE CAST

Carl Bernstein	Dustin Hoffman
Bob Woodward	Robert Redford
Ben Bradlee	Jason Robards
Harry Rosenfeld	Jack Warden
Howard Simons	Martin Balsam
"Deep Throat"	Hal Holbrook
Bookkeeper	Jane Alexander
Martin Dardis	Ned Beatty
Hugh Sloan Jr.	Stephen Collins
Debbie Sloan	Meredith Baxter
Sally Aiken	Penny Fuller
Foreign Editor	John McMartin
Donald Segretti	Robert Walden
Eugene Bachinski	David Arkin
Al Lewis	Joshua Shelley
Dardis' Secretary	Polly Holliday
Key Eddy	Lindsay Ann Crouse
Miss Milland	Valerie Curtin
Angry CRP Woman	Neva Patterson
Bookkeeper's Sister	Sloane Shelton
Financial Editor	Leroy Aarons
Himself	Frank Wells