

WATERGATE



Tracking It Down

By **CARL BERNSTEIN**

"One story, Watergate, will be the story of the year and maybe the story of the decade. It is also rare that one newspaper and one pair of reporters are so clearly identifiable and so clearly ahead of the rest of us in covering that story. That pair of reporters, of course, are Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward of the Washington Post."

— William Small
CBS News

I SUPPOSE what we're asked most often is how we covered the story, which, obviously, to some extent presents some problems when it comes to discussing sources and others we've talked to.

But there is one central point about Watergate that might be helpful to anyone who's interested in journalism, especially Washington journalism. And that is we used very basic, tested reportorial techniques — empirical police reporting techniques. You knock on a lot of doors, you make a lot of telephone calls, you don't take people to the Sans Souci to lunch until you know something.

These are some of the ways we were able to learn what we did. In Washington, the press corps is largely accustomed to learning things over lunch and perhaps not doing the kind of digging that younger reporters have always been asked to do or are ac-

customed to doing.

Basically, here's what we tried to do. It was evident after two days following the Watergate break-in that there possibly was much more to Watergate than John Mitchell's explanation of June 18 would indicate. That was when Mitchell (who was then heading up Nixon's re-election campaign) said a man employed part-time by the Re-election of the President committee in a security capacity had been arrested. By the following Monday, the *Washington Post* was able to say that one of the suspects had in a phone book the name of Howard Hunt next to the abbreviation, "W. House." (Howard Hunt, former CIA agent and White House consultant, is one of seven men who have been convicted so far in the Watergate break-in and bugging.—ed.)

From then on in we operated without any preconceived notions about where

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this would take us, but rather on what the FBI and some other law enforcement agencies call “an investigative assumption.” What that means is: If you see a pattern and it seems to indicate something to you, you continue to follow logically where that is going to lead. One thing I have learned throughout this story is not to speculate.

Perhaps some of the problems that came up during the federal investigation of Watergate, especially at the prosecutorial level and at the FBI level, were based on what former acting FBI Director L. Patrick Gray called a “presumption of regularity” about people in the administration. This, as opposed to the investigative assumption that the facts that we were seeing led us to proceed under. I think that we just very logically through many hours did the kind of reporting they probably teach in J-school, the kind that when I was a copy boy I watched other reporters do — that is, not to let anything fall through the cracks.

You try to get lists; you try to find out who works somewhere; you try to find out lines of authority; you try to understand how the White House works, which is a tremendous difficulty and has been during the Nixon administration — because even the news people who cover the White House, we’ve found, really didn’t have much more than a superficial understanding of who worked there, what the lines of authority were, exactly how the White House was structured, how the Committee for the Re-election of the President was structured.

This helped us understand some things when we figured out a little bit more about who was working where and what their responsibilities

were. We could put that kind of information together with a certain set of facts, make some investigative assumptions again, and then find out if we were right through various contacts that we had made during the course of the investigation.

Obviously, since both Bob and I are metropolitan reporters, we didn’t have the kinds of sources that others may have who cover or have covered the White House. So we made new sources as we went along. And if you have followed the Watergate series, even though we’ve often referred to sources anonymously, you can sort of see how the stories have progressed — in the sense that most of the early stories refer to “sources close to the investigation” or “federal investigators.” Later, you would have seen some stories attributed to personnel of the Committee for the Re-election of the President. Then, perhaps you would have seen some stories that we attributed to White House sources and highly placed sources in the executive branch.

Gradually, as we learned more and more, we found more and more people we could go to. There has been an increase in our sources, but it never was a question of leaks. I’m always amused by the term “news leaks.” I wish very early on we would have had some. But it’s rare when somebody brings you a piece of paper or a set of documents.

Anyone who’s done this kind of work knows that it just doesn’t happen. It really was, as I said, empirical, basic reporting.

Back on June 17, 1972, the Watergate caper looked like a simple burglary (and that’s when Woodward and Bernstein were assigned

from the metropolitan desk of the *Post* to cover the story — ed.). Later, when it looked like more than just a burglary, it was pretty evident that Bob and I would still stay on the story.

We realized early in the story — especially by Aug. 1 when we knew that financial connections had been made between the suspects and the Committee for the Re-election of the President, and by Oct. 10 when we knew there was a broad campaign of espionage and sabotage — I think then we had a pretty clear understanding of the stakes. Somebody said, “This is a real hardball game.” Which it was — and is.

Knowing that there had not been candor, knowing that there had not been honesty, we proceeded under the assumption that our credibility would be attacked so that people would not believe the facts as they were coming out. When that’s done in the middle of a campaign, especially when one surrounds himself with the office of the presidency and tries to give the whole matter of Watergate a political tinge and attack the motives of the press and tries to attribute some of the things coming out in the newspapers to Sen. McGovern’s people, it has to be expected that reporting a story of this magnitude is not going to have the kind of effect that it has after an election. That was one reason I was glad when the election was over.

But then there was a tight period of reporting that surprised us very much. We had expected as soon as the campaign was over that the story would open up a little bit, that we would do much better than we had done through October. We were looking forward to the end of the campaign, because, as most every-

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body knows, the *Post* was being attacked as the handmaiden of George McGovern and through even stronger comments by people in the administration. We would have been better off to be operating without the handicaps we felt the campaign put us under. We thought things would open up after Nov. 7.

Instead, they got much tighter, to the point where we had a more difficult time from Nov. 7 to the middle of December than we've had any time else. We were unable to find out virtually anything except a little piece here and there. Finally, around Dec. 13, something gratifying happened, especially since we were always being attacked for not using sources' names. We managed to get something completely on the record and attributed. It was a story quoting a former White House secretary about a phone that had been installed in Howard Hunt's office in the basement of the executive office building. It was the only phone of its type in the executive branch as far as we could determine. It was billed as a private phone to the home of the secretary. It was exclusively for Mr. Hunt's use. It had been installed with the approval of John Ehrlichman's office, and the only conversations that anyone ever heard on the telephone were in Spanish.

(John Ehrlichman, chief domestic affairs adviser to President Nixon at the time, has since been forced to resign as a result of the Watergate scandal and is being investigated by a federal grand jury as a possible director of a cover-up conspiracy. Howard Hunt, who has been linked directly to Ehrlichman in both the Watergate operation and related secret dealings, has admitted

recruiting two expatriate Cubans to carry out the Watergate raid the night of June 17 when he and they were arrested.—ed.)

Since June 17, Bob Woodward and I have worked six and seven days a week on this story and long hours. Most people who do have information regarding Watergate obviously don't want to be seen talking about it. This means we have to do an awful lot of work at night.

It's always possible that someone will call us as a witness to hearings in the Watergate case. We will deal with that problem when it comes up. I can't see why we should be called. We were subpoenaed by Maurice Stans (head of the re-election committee's financing) in one of the civil suits by the Committee for the Re-election of the President and were asked to produce our notes, documents, tapes, etc. We refused and went to court with a motion to quash the subpoena, along with the *Washington Star-News*, *Time Magazine* and the *New York Times*. A judge quashed the subpoenas.

Until Oct. 10, when we wrote that the break-in and the bugging were all part of a much larger campaign of political espionage and sabotage, the caper as far as the apparent re-election of Nixon was concerned seemed to make no sense. There just didn't seem to be any reason for it. At that period of time the President was clearly the favorite for re-election.

But after it was established that there was a campaign of espionage and sabotage involved with the tailing of candidates and attempts to bug their headquarters, we were eventually able to trace the origins of what happened to just after the mid-term elections of 1970. If you

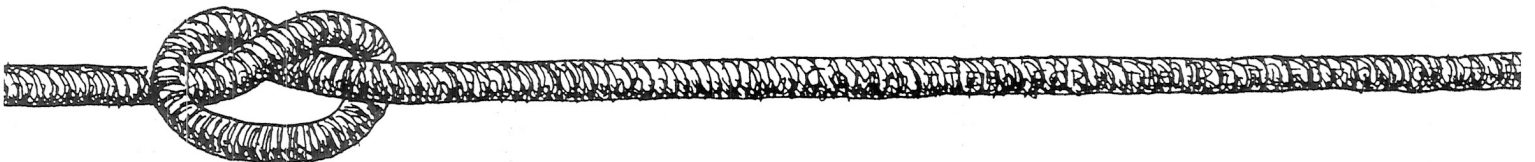
remember then, the President had embarked on the strategy of his new Republican majority and attempted to capture control of the Senate. It was a campaign based largely on attacking radicals, such as the Vice President's attacks on “radic-libs.”

From the point of view of the White House it was a disastrous campaign. It ended with television appearances the night before the election in 1970 of Mr. Nixon in an almost kinescoped, very bad tape of perhaps his most intense speech on the subject of radicals, as contrasted to a cool, collected, “Lincolnesque” (a term commentators used at the time) Muskie, sitting behind a desk and appealing for Democratic votes. The results of the mid-term elections went nowhere toward establishing a majority in the Senate for the President's party.

Moreover, polls began to show Mr. Muskie reaching the same point in popularity as the President and eventually eclipsing that point. Sen. Kennedy was also considered a possible contender for the presidency at the time, and he was another whom the White House was worried about. And Gov. Wallace was going to run as a Democrat, with the possibility that there would later be a third-party candidacy.

So, the President, as he himself said in some private remarks at a White House function around that period of time, looked like he might be a one-term President. The effects of the war and the economy were hurting him, and with the polls, the White House viewed it as a rather dire situation.

But there were also people in the White House who realized that Sen. McGovern had done some fine grass-roots organizing and was not



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as far out in the woods in terms of getting the Democratic nomination as most people thought, especially as most Democrats thought.

A basic strategy was agreed upon in late 1970 and early 1971. That strategy very clearly was to make Sen. McGovern the Democratic nominee and knock Sen. Muskie out. And that’s what the activities were designed to do that occurred in the primary states, that’s what the Segretti activities were all about, that’s what the “Canuck” letter was all about, that’s what phone calls in the middle of the night by black voters for Muskie were all about, and the whole campaign of espionage and sabotage.

(Bernstein is referring to Donald Segretti, a California lawyer admittedly hired by at least one White House assistant to help disrupt Democratic campaign activities through a coordinated network of spying and infiltration. Segretti has been indicted for fabricating a slanderous letter, attributed to Sen. Muskie, in which two rival Democrats for the presidential nomination were accused of sexual peccadilloes. The term “Canuck,” often considered a slur toward French-Canadians, was also falsely attributed to Muskie.—ed.)

I don’t think we’ll ever know what the determinate factors were in the eventual nomination of McGovern, but it should give us all a better understanding of why Watergate came about. And now, of course, what we’re seeing in the Pentagon papers trial being tied in with Watergate indicates that there have been wiretaps throughout this administration. We reported that newspaper reporters were wiretapped, with the authorization of

John Mitchell, going back to the SALT talks.

So there’s a history of undercover activities by this administration, and Watergate is not an illogical extension of them. The direct purpose was to manipulate the internal politics of the opposition. I don’t think we’ve seen this happen before, at least not in this century, and at least nothing before of this magnitude.

As for criticism leveled at the press from the administration, the best way to demonstrate that we’re not telling lies is to continue to print the facts. One of the things that helped us at the *Post* immeasurably is that we did just that, that gradually others did it. *Time* magazine came up with some fine reporting. So did the *New York Times* and others.

We were vulnerable as to public opinion early in the Watergate story. The administration had about four years of chips to cash in, stemming from Spiro Agnew’s remarks and from some of the things the President, Ronald Ziegler, Clay Whitehead and others have said. They really did try to cash in the chips, because this was a time they really needed to.

What you saw was an attack on our credibility, which I suppose was probably unprecedented in terms of the intensity and scope of it. And especially because it came during an election campaign, and because the White House attempted to make this caper look like “whatever is there, it’s just politics as usual,” which it distinctly was not. Gradually, most people in the country perceived that something was seriously amiss. After people had seen developing news accounts, I think phrases like “According to sources

close to. . .” didn’t bother them nearly so much.

We’ve gone completely to the other end of the spectrum. Where our credibility at the beginning was low, our credibility and the credibility of the press in general right now, as a result of Watergate, is infinitely higher than it has been in a long time.

I would hate to see that become an excuse for license on the part of the press, which is to say that the *Washington Post* or anyone else would change its standards about what goes in the paper and how well documented it has to be. There were some grounds for the attacks we’ve heard over the past four years, although I don’t believe in the conspiracy theories of the media.

I do think the performance of the media, especially during the Nixon administration, has not been exemplary. Now I would just hate to see the balance go the other way and we use this as an excuse to start shooting from the hip. The reason that the *Washington Post* in the case of Watergate was able to make it through this story to the point where our credibility is now, or where I hope it is, is because we were very careful.

We had some rules that we used about not going with anything based on one source, simply because we knew some items of information were planted. We wanted to be able to check things in two places. We have been consistent about observing that rule unless there was particular reason to ignore it. And we’re not about to change the rules at this stage of the game.

I do hope that one of the lessons of all this is that we’ll all become a little bit more responsible. ■