

## Books of The Times

*Story of an Unfinished Story*

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

**ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MEN.** By Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward. 349 pages. Illustrated. Simon & Schuster, \$8.95.

In a way, it's too bad that Carl Bernstein's and Bob Woodward's "All the President's Men" had to appear at the same time that President Nixon decided to publish a book of his own (which is now available in three paperback editions: "Submission of Recorded Presidential Conversations to the Committee on the Judiciary of the House of Representatives by President Richard Nixon," United States Government Printing Office, \$12.25; "The White House Transcripts," with an introduction by R. W. Apple Jr. of The New York Times, Bantam, \$2.50; and "The Presidential Transcripts," with commentary by the Staff of The Washington Post, Dell, \$2.45). It's too bad, because if it had appeared after the Watergate scandal had run its course—a course whose future has only been made more dramatic by the appearance of the Presidential transcripts—Mr. Bernstein's and Mr. Woodward's "All the President's Men" would have been one hell of a book to read.

**Rich Drama and Details**

Without the distraction of the transcripts and their aftermath, one would have been able to concentrate on what the book really is—a story of journalistic enterprise recounting how the two young political reporters on The Washington Post dug behind what appeared at first to be a comic-opera spying caper, unearthed what turned out to be a political scandal of unprecedented dimensions, and won a Pulitzer Prize for their paper. One would have been able to immerse oneself in the story's rich drama—to feel one's pulse quicken as the two reporters pick up the scent of the trail (from the moment they began to investigate James W. McCord Jr.'s C.I.A. connections, one thing led logically to the next); to gulp apprehensively when they stumble in their pursuit (their worst moment occurred when they got their sources' signals crossed and reported H. R. Haldeman's putative guilt in the wrong context); and to cheer triumphantly when events finally force Presidential press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler to apologize for castigating The Washington Post (according to United Press International's report of the apology, "As Ziegler finished he started to say, 'But . . . ' He was cut off by a reporter who said: 'Now don't take it back, Ron.'").

One would have been able to savor the story's colorful details: how Messrs. Bernstein and Woodward began their collaboration feeling skeptical and jealous of each other's skills, and only gradually came to appreciate their merger's synergy (their narrative presents them both in the third-person singular, thus creating a winning impression of objectivity and candor); or how former Attorney General John N. Mitchell reacted when confronted over the

telephone with the reporters information that he had "controlled" the "secret funds" at the Committee to Re-elect the President. ("JEEEEEEEEESUS," Mr. Mitchell kept ejaculating, as if giving vent to "some sort of primal scream." "Katie Graham's [Mrs. Katharine Graham, the publisher of The Washington Post] gonna get her [anatomical reference deleted] in a big fat wringer if that's published. Good Christ. That's the most sickening thing I ever heard.")

Most important, one would have read "All the President's Men" as a primer on the techniques of investigative reporting, and studied with the utmost absorption how Messrs. Bernstein and Woodward milked their sources (the most informative and intriguing of whom was someone in the executive branch nicknamed "Deep Throat" because his information was always on "deep background," meaning in newspaper parlance that he could never be quoted either directly or indirectly); how they skirted but never quite crossed over the bounds of ethical decency (for instance, they approached but never asked for information from members of the Watergate grand jury, for which practice they were admonished by Judge John J. Sirica with unexpected mildness); or how they always took pains to ask themselves whether they were being entirely fair to the people they were investigating.

**Looking for Revelations**

This is how one would read "All the President's Men" if the Watergate story were not still unfolding, and this is how one will doubtless read it when the story is done. But in the meantime, the story is not done. At the very time that the book appears, the drama approaches new and unforeseen climaxes. And so willy-nilly one reads Mr. Bernstein's and Mr. Woodward's report not for the journalistic story it tells, but for what it reveals behind Watergate. And as such it is an old story overshadowed by the astonishing developments that are unfolding daily. And one is left feeling frustrated and ever-so-slightly disappointed (as I overheard one bookstore browser muttering, after misguidedly skimming the book for revelations: "What's the big deal?").

Obviously, all this is not to be blamed on Mr. Bernstein and Mr. Woodward. When the story passed out of their exclusive control, they turned to recording their involvement while their impressions were still fresh. And in compensation for doing so they have been richly (and with poetic justice) rewarded with lucrative book-club, paperback and movie contracts. But for the time being at least, the average reader does lose out. To appreciate "All the President's Men" properly, one will have to wait until the storm of Watergate has subsided. Then, and only then, will one enjoy it for the classic in the art of political reportage it will unquestionably turn out to be.