

Books

A Classic in The Art of Political Reportage

ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MEN. By Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward. Simon & Schuster; 349 pp.; \$8.95.

Reviewed by *W.T.*

Christopher Lehmann-Haupt

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 "Submission of Recorded Presidential Conversations to the Committee on the Judiciary of The House of Representatives."

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 — Bernstein's and Woodward's "All the President's Men" would have been one Hell of a book to read.

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.

Rich Drama

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



CARL BERNSTEIN AND BOB WOODWARD AT THE WASHINGTON POST

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 CIA 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.

Most important, however, 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 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.

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 Bernstein's and Woodward's report not for the journalistic story it tells, but for what it reveals behind Watergate.

Obviously, all this is not to be blamed on Bernstein and 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.

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