

Writing "Hot History"

Authors Woodward and Bernstein talk with an eminent historian about investigative reporting and its place in the formulation of history.

by Max Lerner

Imagine the most powerful man in the world, but a deeply flawed man. Imagine him, in a moment of overweening hubris, presiding over a secret, lawless scheme to ensure his re-election, convinced that only he can carry the burden of world power and prevail over America's inner enemies. Imagine this scheme surfacing in an accidental minor outcropping, then being covered up, and eventually being tracked down and exposed. Finally, imagine the unraveling of the man's power, of his regime, of the man himself, in the last agonized days.

It is the story of the unraveling that Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein have told in *The Final Days*, in overwhelming, microscopic detail. Call it investigative journalism, call it hot history—call it whatever. The fact is that the two authors did it in the way most natural to them—as a story to be “covered.” They started a few days after Nixon resigned, organized their file system, deployed themselves and their staff, and fanned out in every direction. Their method was that of truth-through-interviews, to get at people fairly close to the action and to weave a skein of first-, second-, and third-hand reports from the interviews.

Does their book change the broad outlines of the picture we already had of the Watergate unraveling? Basically, no. Does it give any new meanings and new dimensions of depth to the story? Again, no. But there are unexpected details—minor surprises that flash out of the otherwise somber narrative—that have been widely picked up by the American and world press. A few of the portraits of second-level figures get filled out—notably, President Nixon's chief of staff, Al Haig; his counsel, Fred Buzhardt; and his press secretary, Ron Ziegler—and one gets a more intimate view of Julie and David Eisenhower than before. As

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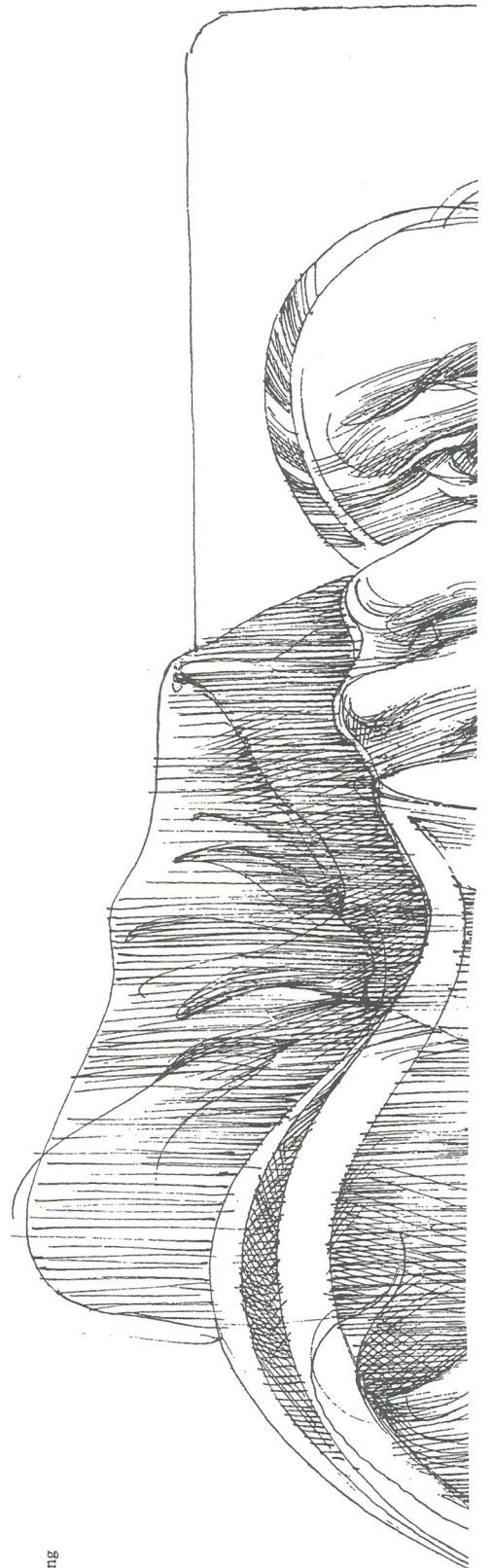
for Nixon himself, the colors are harsh, sometimes grotesque. It is the portrait of a man losing control over himself as he loses control of the struggle to keep from being impeached.

The *Newsweek* excerpts, and the news releases and press stories based on them, were so lurid in their overkill that the book itself, with stretches of sober, sometimes prosaic detail, seems a relief. Yet in conversations I had with each of the authors, I put to them some of my reservations: on perspective, on the tests of evidence, on detachment and bias, on the trust they ask the reader to share, on the differences between a journalistic foray and a historical siege.

They had thought about the problems, and they had answers. Of the two, Woodward was a bit more skeptical than Bernstein of the way the excerpts had been managed, yet both insisted that the press would have overplayed them anyway. (My own view: maybe the press was overeager, but the lady was seductively arrayed.)

On the evidence question, it would be foolish to treat a journalistic book as if it were a court of law, in which the rights of the accused have to be jealously guarded against hearsay, and the witnesses are raked over in cross-examination. I mentioned to them the injunction of the German historian von Ranke to tell the story “as it actually happened” (*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*) and to be sure to have two witnesses to every event, not in collusion with each other and neither of them self-deceived. The authors cheerfully accepted it. I am ready to believe that in the vast majority of interviews they succeeded in checking and double-checking the information. But the self-interest of many of their sources—their public face, their desire to rid themselves of the Watergate taint and get a better role in the drama of history—seems to me an insurmountable obstacle, unless the reader knows who the sources are and can make his own assessment of them.

This is, of course, the nub problem. It



Bob Ziering



is the more serious because the authors—given their major role in tracking down the cover-up in their *Washington Post* articles—had themselves been actors on the stage of history and had a stake of their own in the story of the final days. A heroic effort at detachment might mitigate some of their inevitable bias, but, offhand, this particular pair wouldn't have been my first choice to venture the heroism.

Consider the difference between the two enterprises. The first was the digging out of a plot and a cover-up, getting at the particulars which would suggest the larger outline. The second was the filling in of an outline generally—if vaguely—known, as faithfully (and colorfully) as possible. A bias and sense of shock about Nixon and Watergate would be helpful to energize the reporters in the first venture, whereas a similar emotional set would be a hindrance in writing history—even contemporary history.

But the larger problem is the anonymity of the sources. American readers are likely to be prove-it-to-me people. The basic decision the authors made was that there was to be no attribution, of a particular conversation or detail, to a particular source. Which means they are asking us for blind trust. Not only must they have "relations of trust" (as they put it) with their sources, but also they expect the reader to trust their assessment of the trustworthiness of the sources. It may have been the only way this particular kind of book could have been written, but the leap of faith it asks for is more of a jump than most of us can make.

Take one of the details I know something about. Of the Supreme Court case on the Nixon tapes, the authors say that Chief Justice Warren Burger came up with an "inadequate" opinion to satisfy the rest, and "finally Justice Potter Stewart undertook to co-author the opinion." As it happens, I tried out this assertion on the Chief Justice, who was astounded by it. He told me that the process of shaping the unanimous opinion was a long one, but that he had been in charge all along and had no "co-authors." Since it is unlikely that any of the justices would have been informants for the authors, it must have been one or two of the clerks—but which? Justice Stewart's? Anyone who knows the Supreme Court knows its internal splits and should be wary of them. I feel the same way about an earlier passage telling what the justices said to one another in their confer-

ence room, which is so secret a place that the last appointed justice has to serve as the only messenger boy. I'd love to see the file on that one.

The trouble is that we can't see any of the files. Woodward told me that they would be turned over to a library collection, to be available at some distant date. In the long run we'll know, but it will be after all the reviews and the gate receipts are in, and in the long run (as John Maynard Keynes used to say) we'll all be dead. Think of how we would feel if Richard Nixon, in his forthcoming memoirs, were to make the same claim to our leap of faith in trusting his anonymous sources.

I DON'T PLAY DOWN the creativeness of investigative journalism, old style or new style. The old style was the Richard Harding Davis stuff, or the muckraking

enrollment next year and make folk heroes out of Woodward and Bernstein.

For a time the phrase *new journalism* afflicted us, but it is now, happily, passing. If it meant anything, it meant a sense of glorying in the reporter's subjectivism. We know that there can be no absolute detachment. As Lord Acton put it, the only true detachment is that of the dead, because they no longer care. But we can make an effort to recognize and appraise our own values, and therefore our bias, and still strive to live up to von Ranke and tell it "as it actually happened," not as our partisan attachments tell us it *should* have happened. Even as a crusader Steffens forced himself to tell the story of the cities straight. Anything else would destroy his credibility, which depended on his tough-minded grasp of the reality. This is still a requirement for journalism, old or new.



Shame of the Cities stuff of Lincoln Steffens, or John Reed's stories about the Mexican War or his reporting on the Russian Revolution in *Ten Days That Shook the World*. This kind of journalism is still heady stuff, as witness the Redford-Hoffman film, from the Woodward-Bernstein *All the President's Men*. It gives a beautiful sense of what goes on in a city room and in an editorial conference, and glorifies the detective-reporter in a way to double the journalism-class

Part of the problem of a book like this is the climate it appears in. Nixon's turnings and churning as he gets boxed in ever tighter, the portrait of him as, in effect, having gone bonkers, is one that fits in with the prevailing mood about him today. There was always the chance—after impeachment, after the trial that would follow—that he would have to go to jail. With the resignation and pardon, it didn't happen that way. But as we re-traverse every hour of those closing days,

we take part in an adjourned session of the trial that wasn't held. We follow the grim windings of the House Judiciary Committee in its deliberations and votes; we are present when Special Prosecutor Leon Jaworski considers the problem of plea-bargaining with Nixon and meditates on how it might be to get a President to turn state's witness against his former aides.

Which of us, as he reads, isn't caught up in the flood of his own memories of the whole enactment? That excellent historian of the Near East, Bernard Lewis, uses a revealing title for his new book of lectures on history. He calls it *History—Remembered, Recovered, Invented* (Princeton University Press). If Woodward and Bernstein have indeed written history, then much of it is remembered and much recovered. The remembered elements serve as a frame for the recovered elements. But the remembered history wasn't just in the memory of the people interviewed but in our own memories as well. This is a case in which Carl Becker's phrase, from his famous lecture on history, applies: "Everyman his own historian." In a more or less rudimentary way, what is true of traditional societies is true of each of us—that we share a collective memory of our recent past as a people, of our folk heroes and folk villains, and that we filter any new information—the history dug up and recovered—through the history remembered. Whether there are also some elements of history invented in the Woodward-Bernstein account is a question we won't be able to answer until the time capsule to be buried in the library is someday opened.

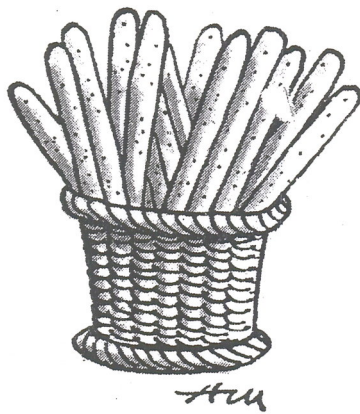
Which again raises the question of the line between good journalism and good history. I suggest five criteria for deciding. First, have the tests of evidence been applied rigorously? Second, has the author tried to make allowance for his own bias and his own value cluster? Third, to what extent are the returns in? In the current book, with a few exceptions, the Palace Guard—primary and secondary—are targets, not witnesses. We won't know the truth about the maneuverings until we have the memoirs of Halde- man, Ehrlichman, Dean, Ziegler, Haig, St. Clair, and of Nixon himself and can compare them with *Final Days*. Until then, with the best of intentions, the authors are limited to the accusatory brand of investigative journalism. Nixon and his cohorts remain targets, not subjects.

The last two criteria are equally im-

portant. You have only a truncated history until you have had time enough to note the consequences of the events and decisions you are writing about. We see Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman more clearly now than in 1955 because we have seen the consequences of their decisions. Which means that the early accounts and estimates, however necessary, are often cruelly inadequate approximations of the historic truth. Finally, the historian must try to make some sense and pattern out of the raw material he has dug up, seeking to be fair and just, and tell it as it actually happened, but seeking also to extract the meaning and implications of the whole story.

WE CAN, of course, get too stuffy about this. In the current case the authors have done what they can best do, which is not to find meanings but to gather events and memories, and set them down chronologically, in a kind of Book of the Days very similar to the Book of the Years of the earliest chroniclers. We can parallel Clemenceau's remark about not leaving war to the generals by saying that we ought not to leave history to the professional historians, who are in danger of stifling it. The craft of history is always in need of rebarbarizing by the energies of talented amateurs, lest it come under the dictatorship of the mandarins. A good example of such an amateur was Gene Smith, who used to work as a reporter on the *New York Post* and who wrote an account of the final days of Woodrow Wilson (one of Nixon's heroes)—*When the Cheering Stopped*. It was good history as well as good journalism, and it passed all five of my criteria with colors flying.

Unless we know the implications of what we know, we don't know much. That is why every good journalist-historian must have in him at least some im-



redients of the psychologist, philosopher, and social analyst, and would do well to add to the accusatory drive a brooding sense of irony and even compassion.

Not for Nixon's sake, but for our own. Here is the epigraph for the last volume of war memoirs by a talented amateur historian, Winston Churchill: "How the Great Democracies Triumphed, and so Were Able to Resume the Follies Which Had so Nearly Cost Them Their Life." I suspect that a future historian will someday write a similarly ironic epigraph about Watergate and Nixon and his resignation, and the follies that we will probably have resumed that nearly cost us our life.

Richard Nixon himself, the central figure of the story as enacted, is, of course, the subject of the book and the target of all the observations. Yet no Nixon—clear or complex, coherent or divided—emerges from the myriad interviews. "Psycho-history is bullshit," Bernstein told me. He has a right to his view, but it suggests an impatience with the nuances of character and the interior maze of agonized contradictions in Nixon's mind.

An investigative journalist can perhaps get along without these subtleties in his relentless focusing on the "facts." But for a historian there is no democracy of facts which are all born free and equal. Why didn't Nixon take some of the other courses open to him—making a bonfire of his tapes or sweating through an impeachment and even a criminal trial without surrendering on the "confidentiality" issue? Why didn't he, even earlier, risk everything on an open confession to the people and thus redeem, if not absolve, himself? What brought about his downfall? Was it his own indecisions and waverings, or was it the breach of faith which his own party leaders finally felt, or was it the rebellion of the much-maligned "bureaucrats" who fed what they knew to the congressional committees and even to investigative reporters?

These are hard questions, which require hard answers. Someday we'll get some of them, and then the whole story of the deterioration of Nixon and his band can be told, along with its implications. The American people will welcome it, because their historical consciousness requires the presence of a sense of the past in their minds, to give the nation continuity, and because they need to get their bearings in history if their civilization is to survive. □