WATERGATE: A Study in Mythology

It's been twenty years since the break-in. Did the press really bring down the president? Did Watergate really change the press?

By Michael Schudson

Watergate overwhelms modern American journalism. The story of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein in bold pursuit of the perpetrators of the Watergate break-in is resonant and powerful in both the world of journalism and the culture at large. At its broadest, the myth asserts that journalism, in particular two young *Washington Post* reporters, brought down the president of the United States.

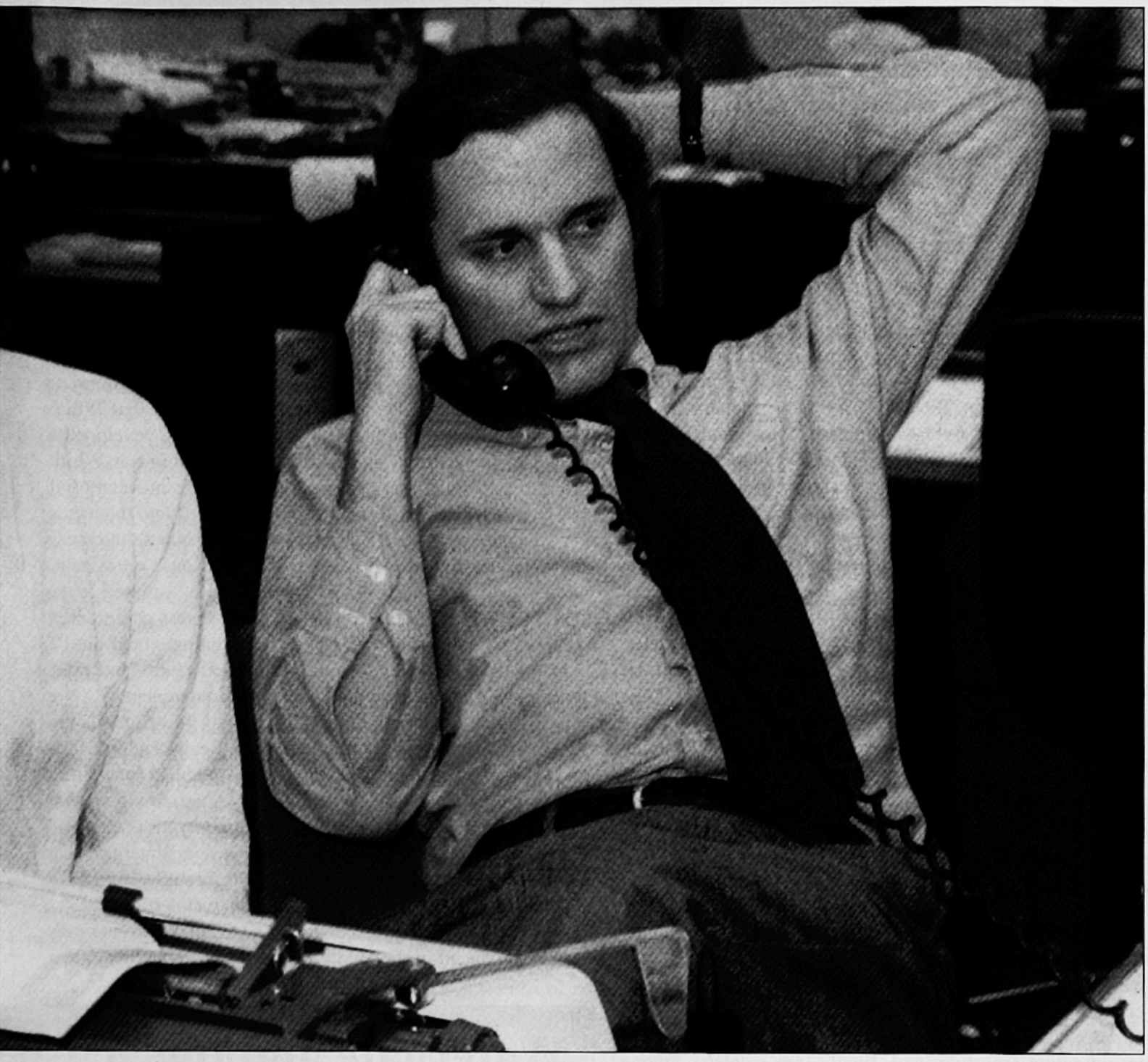
It is a myth that has been seriously challenged on at least three points. First, did "the press" as an institution act courageously to keep power in check? Or was it especially one lonely newspaper, or even a few lonely individuals within that newspaper, who acted in ways *uncharacteristic* of the press in general?

Second, was the press unaided in its battle against the evils of Watergate? Or was it but one institution and one set of individuals among many, with Congress and the courts standing at its side and with other institutions, including the FBI, making equally important contributions?

Third, was the press unbiased in its pursuit of Watergate, driven only by its sense of responsibility to the public weal? Or was it partisan, even petty, all too delighted to bring down a man many journalists had long abhorred?

Michael Schudson is the chair of the department of communication at the University of California, San Diego. This article is excerpted from Watergate in American Memory: How We Remember, Forget, and Reconstruct the Past, *to be published by Basic Books, a division of HarperCollins, in June.*

Bob Woodward (above, right) and Carl Bernstein on the job at The Washington Post *in 1973 — and their Hollywood counterparts, Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman, on the lot.*



UPI/BETTMANN

On each point, a critical look at the myth of journalism in Watergate forces some telling adjustments. First, the press as a whole did not pursue Watergate — not in the beginning, at least. *The Washington Post* did. From the break-in in June 1972 until after the election in November, the *Post* frequently felt itself in solitary pursuit of a story that many leading journalists regarded as a figment of active election-year imaginations. Katharine Graham, then publisher of *The Washington Post*, recalls saying to editor Benjamin Bradlee, "If this is such a hell of story, where is everybody else?"

Second, journalists did not uncover Watergate unassisted. In a mini-classic of press criticism, Edward Jay Epstein asked in *Commentary*, "Did the Press Uncover Watergate?" and answered in the negative. In *All the President's Men*, Epstein points out, the contributions of the FBI investigations, the federal prosecutors, the grand jury, and the congressional committees are "systematically ignored or minimized by Bernstein and Woodward." The journalistic contribution was, in fact, only one among many, and there would have been no presidential resignation had it not been for Judge John Sirica, the Ervin committee, the existence and discovery of the White House tapes, and other factors. Even the matter of "keeping the story alive" was not exclusively a reportorial function: candidate George McGovern kept talking about Watergate throughout his campaign; the General Accounting Office, Common Cause, and the Democratic National Committee and its lawsuit against the Nixon campaign all forced disclosures that kept the Watergate story in the public eye. Moreover, the journalistic contribution itself was dependent on government officials who risked their jobs or their careers by leaking to the press. Epstein insists that it was less the press that exposed Watergate than "agencies of government itself."

Third, skeptics have argued that it was not journal-

ism's devotion to truth but the contempt of the liberal news media for Richard Nixon that led the media to pursue the Watergate story. *The Washington Post*, indeed, had a liberal tradition, but "liberal bias" does little to explain why the *Post* followed up every allegation that came to it of Democratic campaign spying against Republicans. "We all wanted to push our coverage to its proper limit, but not any farther," Woodward and Bernstein's immediate supervisor, Barry Sussman, has recalled, "and we didn't want to be tools in anyone's election campaign." As for Bradlee, he backed up his young reporters and their editors because he was after a good story, not after Richard Nixon. Media scholar and former *Washington Post* national editor Ben Bagdikian recalls Bradlee saying, "I want every cocktail party in Georgetown talking about this."

There is a second myth about Watergate and the media. It addresses not what journalism did in Watergate but what Watergate did to journalism. This myth is that Watergate led to a permanently more powerful, more celebrated, and more aggressive press. This myth is often supported by reference to a set of presumably empirical propositions: Watergate created unprecedented bitterness between the president and the White House press corps; it turned journalists into celebrities; it caused an unprecedented (and, it is often added, excessive) increase in investigative reporting; and, finally (see sidebar), among young people it led to an extraordinary increase of interest in journalism as a career.

These propositions about post-Watergate journalism are widely believed, but are they true?

The White House Press and the President. Journalists and observers of journalism agree that for a time after Watergate a tone of civility between the White House press corps and White House staff vanished. Before Watergate, the White House press corps had been "passive," *Washington Post* reporter Thomas Edsall told me; after Watergate it became "angry-passive." Ron Nessen, President Ford's press secretary, attributes this to the frustration White House reporters felt at being scooped by Woodward and Bernstein, who "broke that story without ever going inside the gates of the White House."

The White House correspondents decided to be investigative reporters, too, but, Nessen said in a nationally televised panel on the Presidency, the Press, and the People, "they thought the way to become an investigative reporter was to bang on the press secretary or ask nasty questions ... of the president." David Broder has observed that White House reporters, outgunned by two unknowns, developed a "professional fury" and a style of questioning at White House briefings that became "almost more prosecutorial than inquisitive." As often as not, this played into the hands of the administration. But it changed, not because the press grew more civil, but because the White House grew more astutely managerial. The "Deaver Rule," named after Reagan aide Michael Deaver, was that at press conferences reporters jumping up and down and shouting would not be recognized. Reporters "would sit in their chairs and raise their hands, or there would be no press conferences."

If the appearance of civility began to return to the White House press conference in the Reagan administration, it was still not the way it had been before. John Chancellor recalls, "I grew up in an America where you could win debates in school by reaching in your pocket and reading official government figures. During Watergate that went out the window. I think Reagan brought it back to some degree. But not much, and the distrust is still there."

How deep does the distrust go? What Watergate may have produced in the White House press conference was a

Watergate and the "rush"

Watergate did not initiate a wave of interest in journalism among students, as myth would have it. The best available data show that the number of majors in programs in journalism and communication began shooting upward in the mid- and late-1960s. Undergraduate degrees awarded in journalism doubled between 1967 and 1972 — the year of the Watergate break-in. The trend continued to move upward through the mid-70s at the same pace as in the late '60s. One can always argue that, without Watergate, it might have tailed off more quickly (enrollments leveled off in the late '70s but picked up again in the '80s). But Watergate clearly did not start the rush to journalism.

Charting journalism majors, of course, is not a perfect index of the interest of young people in journalism as a career. Perhaps students majoring in history or literature or economics sought positions in journalism more than they did before Watergate. Yet even if this is true, surely any

The influence of Watergate on investigative journalisim proved most devastating for President Jimmy Carter

AP/WIDE WORLD

public relations need for journalists to *appear* adversarial rather than a motivational drive to actually *be* adversarial. *Washington Post* editor Leonard Downie insists that Watergate did not reduce the civility between press and government, with the solitary exception of the press conference — an institution he regards as unrepresentative of the actual interaction. "Press conferences account for very little information gathering by the press," he says. "They're mostly stagey events." But Gerald Warren, deputy press secretary to Richard Nixon and now editor of the *San Diego Union*, has a very different recollection. He saw a sharp decline of civility not only in White House press conferences but also in private press briefings, and not only at the White House but also at the State Department, where, traditionally, reporters had been more diplomatic than the diplomats.

Ben Bradlee, at the time I spoke with him in 1991, thought the White House press had grown all too civil. "I worry about the lack of *in*civility. The Gridiron Club? That's an embarrassment, the way that the press aspires to the establishment and, in fact, has made it." Civility is not something easy to measure, but I am inclined to credit this element of the Watergate myth: that Watergate contributed to the uncivil expression of surface tensions between the press and the government, at the White House certainly and most likely beyond. This is not to say, however, that the press became more adversarial.

Celebrification. The proposition that Watergate propelled journalists to fame and fortune is well supported by the experience of Woodward and Bernstein. The book *All the President's Men*, when it appeared in May 1974, was the fastest-selling nonfiction hardback in the history of American publishing. The film version — released in the spring of 1976, during the presidential primaries — won widespread critical acclaim. *New York Times* film critic Vincent Canby, for example, praised it for its ability "to make understandable to nonprofessionals the appeal and the rewards of American journalism at its best."

The film pushed the David versus Goliath myth of Watergate journalism to its height, and in doing so it evoked a skeptical response. In May 1976, a month after the film opened, Associated Press general manager Wes Gallagher, in an address to the American Newspaper Publishers Association, complained that Watergate had let loose "an investigative reporting binge of monumental proportions," adding, "The First Amendment is not a hunting license, as some today seem to think." At the same meeting, ANPA chairman Harold W. Anderson criticized journalists who "almost joyously cast themselves in the role of an adversary of government officials." Woodward and Bernstein were made household names thanks to the acting efforts of Redford and Hoffman, but their celebrification made them fair game for criticism.

Watergate certainly contributed to the celebrification of journalists and the notoriety of celebrification. However, other factors, often overlooked, contributed decisively, too. The development of the Public Broadcasting System with a new range of news programs and the rapid growth of cable television's appetite for relatively cheap, easy-to-produce news programs created a growing *organizational* demand for journalists to appear on TV. By the 1980s the call for televisable journalists was enormous, from *Nightline* to *The McLaughlin Group*, both of which, as James Fallows has observed, "magnify journalists' celebrity and blur the distinction between journalists and politicians." Once celebrified on television, journalists became more bankable on the lecture circuit, as well.

Celebrification is, of course, part of a larger develop-

to journalism

turn toward journalism was caused not by Watergate alone but by the whole context of the moralism of '60s and the general turn to public affairs.

It is impossible to distinguish a "Watergate" effect on the growing interest of young people in journalism from the vital influence of other forces contemporaneously at work: the still-fresh inspiration of John Kennedy's live television press conferences, the growing opportunities for women in journalism, the increasing salaries of journalists (at least in national publications), the increasing lucrativeness of local broadcast news programming, and, most of all, the continuing influence of national events of the 1960s, from John Kennedy's assassination to those of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy, and to the succession of shattering reports from Vietnam — not only about the slow progress of the war, but about its moral horrors, as well.

M.S.

The very term "the media" was promoted by the Nixon White House because it sounded unpleasant, manipulative

AP/WIDE WORLD

ment — the rising status of Washington journalists. Power is the currency of Washington. People are measured by their clout, and after Watergate, rightly or wrongly, the clout of journalists has been judged greater than ever before. Ironically, the enhanced status of journalism may owe more to Richard Nixon than to Woodward and Bernstein. From the beginning of his presidency, Nixon insisted on treating the press as the enemy and on identifying it as a distinct power center in American life rather than as a representative of the public or a medium through which other power centers speak.

The aim of the Nixon administration was not only to make the president look good but to make the press as an institution look bad. In early 1970, H.R. Haldeman wrote Herb Klein a memo urging him to get the story out in the media that Nixon had overcome the "great handicaps under which he came into office," namely, "the hostile press epitomized by the NEW YORK TIMES, WASHINGTON POST, TIME, NEWSWEEK, etc., the hostile network commentators, the generally hostile White House press corps, the hostile Congress, etc."

The outcome of the Nixon administration's calculated attacks on the press was just what *Chicago Daily News* reporter Peter Lisagor suggested at the time — that the administration successfully promoted for the news media an identity separate from that of the public. The very term "the media" was promoted by the Nixon White House because it sounded unpleasant, manipulative, a much less favorable term than "the press." The administration insisted that the media were not, as they often claimed to be, the voice of the people. Nor were they, as many had traditionally understood them, the voice of wealthy publishers, on the one hand, or organs of political parties, on the other. Instead, they were an independent and dangerously irresponsible source of power. The aggressiveness of *The Washington Post* in Watergate, then, played out a scenario drafted by the Nixon White House.

Not surprisingly, the myth of Watergate-in-journalism, journalism transformed by Watergate, serves two masters — the government, which can employ it to portray itself as unfairly besieged, and journalism, which can use it to present itself as a brave and independent social force. Both usages veil the fact that the relationship between public officials and the press in Washington is, for the most part, comfortable and cooperative.

Rise of Investigative Reporting. Did Watergate lead to an increase in investigative reporting? This depends on what investigative reporting is. Of course, Watergate was not the beginning of an adversarial relationship between the government and the Washington press corps. The key event was Vietnam, not Watergate, and the "credibility gap" that drew the press toward deep distrust of government voices first came to a head in Johnson's administration, not Nixon's. But the real question is not whether investigative reporting increased — all signs indicate it did — but when this increase began and whether it was transient.

Many news organizations began their investment in investigation before Watergate. *Newsday*, for example, established an investigative team in 1967, as did The Associated Press; the *Chicago Tribune* did so a year later, and *The Boston Globe* in 1970. *The New York Times*, for its part, devoted increasing resources to investigative work throughout the 1960s.

The influence of Watergate on investigative journalism was most evident in the immediate aftermath of Watergate, and proved most devastating for President Jimmy Carter. Journalists in Washington were newly aware of government deceit and newly hungry for investigative work. As Ben Bradlee put it, reporters, especially young ones, "covered the most routine rural fires as if they were Watergate and would come back and argue that there was gasoline in the hose and the fire chief was an anti-Semite and they really thought that was the way to fame and glory."

The Carter years were a time, Carter himself has noted, "when every reporter thought, well, since they found horrible events in the president's life in Watergate, maybe there's something here. If we dig deep enough, we'll find it." Carter's press secretary, Jody Powell, quotes Bob Woodward on the case of Hamilton Jordan's alleged cocaine use at a New York disco: "You have to remember that our experience for the past ten or fifteen years has been that in the end the government official always ended up being guilty as charged. We just didn't run across people whose defense held up under close scrutiny." And a *New York Times* reporter who covered the Hamilton Jordan story explained that he believed Jordan guilty because "in every

case that I can remember, the politician turned out to be lying."

By the Reagan years, the investigative binge seemed over. In part, it could not last: there were no Watergates turned up after years of digging. Journalists grew discouraged. In part, leaders in journalism came down hard on overzealous investigative work themselves. In part, Ronald Reagan was just terribly good at public relations, at least in his first term.

Whereas the film *All the President's Men* glorified and popularized the myth of journalism-in-Watergate, the myth of Watergate-in-journalism received filmic presentation in *Absence of Malice*. Where the one implied that dubious reportorial tactics are justified when the press goes after a powerful public leader who turns out to be, indeed, guilty of crimes, the other condemns the tactics of a newspaper going after a private person who, in fact, turns out to be not guilty. And while the audience of *All the President's Men* saw events from the point of view of Woodward and Bernstein, in *Absence of Malice* we were tutored by the camera to see journalism's victims.

Despite all the suggestions of Watergate's influence on post-Watergate journalism, there is something remarkably elusive about it. The "null hypothesis," that Watergate did *not* change journalism at all, has some unlikely adherents. Carl Bernstein leaned toward it in remarks on Watergate and the Press at the Kennedy School in 1989: "Watergate has not had the effect one would have hoped it would have. We haven't seen any truly significant breakthroughs in journalism" since Richard Nixon resigned. Bob Woodward also inclined toward this view in suggesting some years ago that Watergate was not the defining moment of a new era but a "blip" in the history of journalism. When I spoke with him in 1991, he was of the same opinion, even suggesting that the 1987 Court of Appeals decision in the Tavoulareas libel suit against *The Washington Post* was a more important watershed in the history of journalism than Watergate.

During the Carter years, reporters kept digging for dirt. By the time Reagan took office, the big investigative binge seemed to be over.

AP/WIDE WORLD

This underestimates just how central the myth of Watergate has become to the practice of journalism. It has, for instance, saddled the press with certain expectations. So when a Lebanese magazine and not an American newspaper broke the Iran-contra story, and when the Congress and not the news media was first off the blocks on the story, this was an occasion for criticism and self-criticism. And when the savings and loan scandal bled all over the news pages long after the real damage was done, former *Wall Street Journal* reporter Ellen Hume dissected the media's failings in *The New York Times* under the headline WHY THE PRESS BLEW THE S&L SCANDAL.

Myths are necessarily ambiguous. They do not tell a culture's simple truths so much as they explore its central dilemmas. They can be read many ways, and the myth of Watergate journalism certainly has been. Anthony Lewis observed as early as 1975 that there is some danger that the press itself might start believing in the Watergate myth that the press is "a tiger — a remorseless antagonist of official deceit, probing for the truth." But in 1975 as before, he argued, officials have great advantages in manipulating the press, and that is the normal situation.

The Watergate myth has empowered the enemies of a bold journalism just as it has inspired practitioners of aggressive reporting. The Watergate myth of an independent and irresponsible "media" is as much the willful creation of Richard Nixon as the accidental invention of Woodward and Bernstein. But it is, for better or for worse, the crystalization of the hopes and fears and confusions of American society about its own press. ◆