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Watergate Revisited

Thirty years after President Nixon's resignation, there's little agreement over just how important a role journalism played in bringing him down. But there's no doubt the episode had a significant impact on the profession.

By **Mark Feldstein**

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Thirty years ago, on August 9, 1974, the Washington Post ran what was then the largest front-page headline in its history: "Nixon Resigns."

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That date marked both the end of Richard Nixon's presidency and the beginning of three decades of debate about what role journalism played in uncovering the Watergate scandal that forced Nixon from office – and how Watergate, in turn, influenced journalism itself. Did media muckraking actually bring down a president of the United States? How have politics and investigative reporting changed as a result?

Thirty years later, the answers to these basic questions remain nearly as polarized as they were in Nixon's day. While journalism schools continue to teach the lesson of Watergate as a heroic example of courageous press coverage under fire, some scholars have concluded that the media played at best a modest role in ousting Nixon from office. So what really happened? In the end, perhaps truth lies somewhere between the self-congratulatory boosterism of journalists and the kiss-off of the academics.

By now, of course, Watergate has become part of our folklore: Five men wearing business suits and surgical gloves arrested in the middle of the night with illegal bugging devices at the Democratic Party headquarters in the Watergate building in Washington, D.C. The burglars turned out to be part of a wide-ranging political espionage and sabotage operation run by President Nixon's top aides, one that triggered a massive White House cover-up directed by the president himself. After that cover-up unraveled, more than 70 people, including cabinet members and White House assistants, were convicted of criminal abuses of power; only a pardon by his presidential successor spared Nixon himself from becoming the first chief executive in history to be indicted for felonies committed in the Oval Office. In the words of Stanley Kutler, the scandal's leading historian, Watergate "consumed and convulsed the nation and tested the constitutional and political system as it had not been tested since the Civil War."

As important as Watergate was in political history, it was perhaps equally so in journalism history. Washington Post reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein produced "the single most spectacular act of serious journalism [of the 20th] century," said media critic Ben Bagdikian. Marvin Kalb, a senior fellow at Harvard's Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and

Public Policy, believes that the Post's reporting was "absolutely critical" to "creating an atmosphere in Washington and within the government that Nixon was in serious trouble and that the White House was engaged in a cover-up. I believe that the reporting of Woodward and Bernstein represents a milestone of American journalism."

Even conservative critics have accepted the notion that Woodward and Bernstein were instrumental in Nixon's downfall. "[T]he Washington Post.. decided to make the Watergate break-in a major moral issue, a lead followed by the rest of the East Coast media," Paul Johnson wrote in his book "Modern Times: A History of the World from the 1920s to the Year 2000." This "Watergate witch-hunt," Johnson declared, was "run by liberals in the media..the first media Putsch in history."

Woodward dismisses both detractors and fans who contend that the media unseated a president. "To say that the press brought down Nixon, that's horseshit," he says. "The press always plays a role, whether by being passive or by being aggressive, but it's a mistake to overemphasize" the media's coverage.

But it was Woodward and Bernstein's best-selling book, "All the President's Men," that focused public attention on the young reporters, especially after Hollywood turned it into a blockbuster movie starring Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman. The film immortalized the chain-smoking anonymous source called "Deep Throat," who met Woodward at night in deserted parking garages after first signaling for meetings with elaborate codes (see [sidebar, "Who Is Deep Throat? Does It Matter?"](#)). Warner Brothers promoted the movie as "the story of the two young reporters who cracked the Watergate conspiracy...[and] solved the greatest detective story in American history. At times, it looked as if it might cost them their jobs, their reputations, perhaps even their lives."

Despite the hype, Woodward and Bernstein did not write a comprehensive history of Watergate, just a memoir of their own experience covering it. "The fallacy in 'All the President's Men' is that..the movie is all from our point of view, so that it seems to be a story about us," Woodward acknowledges. "But that's just one piece of what happened early in the process."

Still, as sociologist Michael Schudson wrote in his book "Watergate in American Memory," that's not the way the public sees it: "A mythology of the press in Watergate developed into a significant national myth, a story that independently carries on a memory of Watergate even as details about what Nixon did or did not do fade away. At its broadest, the myth of journalism in Watergate asserts that two young Washington Post reporters brought down the president of the United States. This is a myth of David and Goliath, of powerless individuals overturning an institution of overwhelming might. It is high noon in Washington, with two white-hatted young reporters at one end of the street and the black-hatted president at the other, protected by his minions. And the good guys win. The press, truth its only weapon, saves the day."

How accurate is this scenario? Not very, according to Kutler, author of what is widely considered the most definitive history of the scandal, "The Wars of Watergate." "As more documentary materials are released," Kutler wrote, "the media's role in uncovering Watergate diminishes in scope and importance. Television and newspapers publicized the story and, perhaps, even encouraged more diligent investigation. But it is clear that as Watergate unfolded from 1972 to 1974, media revelations of crimes and political misdeeds repeated what was already known to properly constituted investigative authorities. In short, carefully timed leaks, not media investigations, provided the first news of Watergate."

"At best," wrote author Edward Jay Epstein, "reporters, including Woodward and Bernstein, only

leaked elements of the prosecutor's case to the public" a few days before it otherwise would have come out anyway. Without any help from the press, Epstein wrote, the FBI linked the burglars to the White House and traced their money to the Nixon campaign – within a week of the break-in. Woodward and Bernstein "systematically ignored or minimized" the work of law enforcement officials to "focus on those parts" of the story "that were leaked to them," Epstein charged.

Kutler found that "local Washington reporting, especially in the Post, closely tracked the FBI's work, relying primarily on raw Bureau reports." Woodstein's account placing the pair at the center of the scandal, the historian wrote, was "self-serving" and "exaggerated," part of "the press' excessive claims for its role." Indeed, he says, even if media coverage during Watergate had been cautious and passive, Nixon would have been forced out of office because an independent court system combined with a Democratic Congress was intent on getting to the bottom of the scandal.

"That's 'if' history, and dubious 'if' history at that," Bernstein counters. "You can't write 'if' history; history is what happened. What happened is that the press coverage played a very big role in making information available that the Watergate break-in was part of something vast and criminal and directed from or near the Oval Office against President Nixon's opponents." Bernstein acknowledges that the "role of Bob [Woodward] and myself has been mythologized" because "in great events people look for villains and heroes" and oversimplify what happened. "At the same time, we were in the right place at the right time and did the right thing."

But other academic experts also minimize journalism's impact. In an analysis of polling data measuring so-called "media effects" on public opinion, communication scholars Gladys and Kurt Lang wrote that "the press was a prime mover in the controversy only in its early phase," when the Post linked the Watergate burglars to Nixon operatives. Journalism's main contributions to influencing public opinion, the husband-and-wife team found, were covering the unfolding events of the scandal and televising the Senate's Watergate hearings. "That so many of the struggles between Nixon and his opponents..played out on television accounts for the impression that the news media and an aroused public opinion forced the downfall of Richard Nixon," the scholars wrote. Journalism may have helped prepare the public ahead of time for Nixon's removal, the authors argued, but it was Congress, not the media, that forced the president's resignation.

Such public opinion polling, however, can be a clumsy way of gauging journalism's impact. The effect of news coverage can be subtle and hard to measure, in part because government investigators may be reluctant to acknowledge that they were responding to publicity; to admit being influenced by journalism could suggest that they weren't properly doing their jobs beforehand. Nonetheless, publicity can push authorities to take action if only to avoid being embarrassed by media disclosures.

"In Watergate," writes historian David Greenberg, author of the new book "Nixon's Shadow," "it was unclear at first whether the FBI would pursue crimes beyond the break-in itself. If the Post hadn't kept Watergate alive, it's not certain that the bureau, or the Senate, would have kept digging. Woodward and Bernstein's work shaped the way Watergate unfolded."

According to Woodward, the late Sam Ervin, chairman of the Senate Watergate Committee, "called me and asked questions, and his work grew out of the stories that we did." Woodward also says that after Nixon's resignation, the presiding federal judge, the late John Sirica, told him "flat out" that the Post's stories influenced him to crack down on the Watergate conspirators. "Judges don't decide to get tough in a vacuum," Woodward says. "Senators don't decide to investigate in a vacuum." Both were influenced by the press, Woodward says, because "the process wasn't uncovering the abuses. It's that simple."

Other journalists who covered Watergate agree. "The record clearly shows that the cover-up would have worked if the press hadn't done its job," says CBS News anchorman Dan Rather, whose aggressive Watergate reporting led the Nixon White House to try to get him fired. Rather maintains that Congress and the courts "didn't have a clue, frankly" about Watergate crimes and that federal investigators wised up "only after repeated and constant coverage" by journalists.

Besides, the battle was political as well as legal, says Jack Nelson, who covered Watergate for the Los Angeles Times: "Nixon was fighting not just prosecutors and Congress but also in the court of public opinion. For all of their controlling Congress, the Demo-crats were not in any sense going to go after Nixon unless the public was behind it. And the public got behind it because of the press..holding Nixon's feet to the fire."

But Watergate prosecutor Seymour Glanzer says that what really mattered – both legally and politically – was **Nixon's failure to destroy his incriminating tape recordings, not the media's coverage**: "Woodward and Bernstein followed in our wake. The idea that they were this great investigative team was a bunch of baloney." Glanzer believes that an official in the FBI's Washington field office leaked details of the Watergate probe to other reporters besides Woodward and Bernstein but that only the Post published them early on because of its larger ongoing "struggle with the White House."

There is no dispute that the Post led other media in the early coverage of Watergate. According to a quantitative analysis by University of Illinois professor Louis W. Liebovich, in the critical first six months after the break-in, the Post published some 200 news articles about Watergate, more than double the number of its nearest competitor, the New York Times. "Many of the Washington Post stories were carried on page one," Liebovich found, play that occurred "only occasionally" in other newspapers after the initial publicity about the break-in died down. In addition, Post stories were more often investigative in nature and "revealed new details about covert activities directed by the White House," while other news organizations "rarely carried their own enterprise stories."

However, the Post's lead diminished later in the scandal as other journalists also uncovered wrongdoing by Nixon and his men. The late Clark Mollenhoff, an investigative reporter who not only covered Watergate for the Des Moines Register but also at one point worked for Nixon, compiled a list of more than three dozen journalists besides Woodward and Bernstein who, he said, "made equally great contributions to the success of the Watergate probe." That undoubtedly overstates the case. But, says University of Virginia political scientist Larry Sabato, other reporters "got too little credit and the Washington Post got too much." According to Nixon White House counsel John W. Dean, as the scandal developed, the reporter "who does the most devastating pieces that strike awfully close to home was Sy Hersh," whom the New York Times assigned to the story.

The Los Angeles Times also dug up scoops "of the same caliber of Woodward and Bernstein," says investigative reporter James Polk, then with the Washington Star, "but the L.A. Times wasn't read in Washington" as widely as the Post and therefore didn't have the same degree of influence. Harvard's Kalb, who was then a correspondent in Washington for CBS News, credits Post Executive Editor Ben Bradlee's "gutsy front-page placement" of Watergate stories as "crucial because there is no paper in Washington like the Post. It is the heart and soul of journalism here... 'Everyone would pick up the Post every morning and read the latest bombshell about Watergate.'"

The Post also faced down both public attacks and private intimidation from the Nixon administration. John Mitchell, Nixon's attorney general, warned Bernstein that his boss, Publisher Katharine Graham, was "gonna get her tit caught in a big fat wringer" as a result of his

Watergate reporting. And Nixon himself privately threatened "damnable, damnable problems" for the Post when it came to getting its television station licenses renewed.

But here, too, the Post was not alone. The Nixon administration variously investigated, wiretapped and audited the income tax returns of numerous reporters. In all, more than 50 journalists appeared on a special White House "enemies list." Nixon's otherwise pro-business Justice Department filed antitrust charges against all three broadcast networks. As Woodward reported a year after Nixon's resignation, Nixon himself allegedly ordered an aide to falsely smear syndicated columnist Jack Anderson as a homosexual, and two White House aides held a clandestine meeting to plot ways to poison the troublesome journalist. In many respects, reporters who investigated Nixon were less hunters than prey.

As a whole, most Washington journalists during Watergate were neither victims nor heroes; few challenged the Nixon White House's version of events during the pivotal first months of the scandal. "Too many people in the press bought into the assumption that there was a 'New Nixon,'" Bernstein remembers, and that Watergate "could not have involved the White House." Historian Kutler dissected the "almost nonexistent" media coverage that took place long after the break-in, when for months "fewer than 15 of the more than 430 reporters in Washington..worked exclusively on Watergate."

Only after Congress and the courts started to expose evidence of White House criminality did the rest of the media finally jump on the story. But coverage then became a feeding frenzy of often inaccurate reporting. CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite falsely implicated White House aide Patrick Buchanan in money-laundering. The New York Times' Jeff Gerth, then a freelance writer, claimed that Nixon's supposed financial ties to Mafia financier Meyer Lansky and Teamsters boss Jimmy Hoffa meant that "organized crime..put its own man in the White House." "In learning from Watergate," wrote Rutgers University professor David Greenberg, reporters "too often emulated not the trailblazers whose skepticism had produced fruitful inquiries but the latecomers who jumped on Watergate only as it was becoming a media spectacle."

"Look," says historian Kutler, "everybody did Watergate and everybody wants credit for it. The fact is, an incredible array of powerful actors all converged on Nixon at once – the FBI, prosecutors, congressional investigators, the judicial system. This included the media. It did not play the leading role, but it did play a role."

Ultimately, this role was more complex than many realize, says former Nixon aide Dean: "People think that the Post cracked the case and they really didn't. Not to take anything away from the Post; it was the only paper that really did any coverage of Watergate early on." But the newspaper's real value, Dean argues, was that it did "just enough to keep the story alive" by lending "legitimacy to those [in the government] who were investigating the scandal." Later in the saga, Dean says, "there is no question that the Senate Watergate hearings and prosecutors were feeding off the media attention they were getting" and "wouldn't have gone as long or as deep but for the frenzy" of press coverage.

In the end, the differing interpretations of Watergate may say as much about those who hold them as they do about what really happened 30 years ago. After all, reporters cover stories close up, focusing on details as events are still unfolding, when ultimate outcomes are unpredictable and unknowable. Historians and sociologists, on the other hand, view the news from afar, when events in retrospect can seem preordained and inevitable.

What effect has Watergate had on journalism since Nixon's resignation? Washington Post Executive Editor Leonard Downie Jr. says the scandal has led to more aggressive coverage of the

White House, where reporters had embarrassed themselves by missing the story of Nixon's culpability. "White House briefings have been entirely different in the last 30 years than in the rest of history," Downie observes. "The relationship between the White House and the press was changed forever by Watergate."

Not everyone thinks this is an improvement. "Many journalists want the big pelt on the wall, and they still dream of Pulitzers and being portrayed by Robert Redford on the big screen," says the University of Virginia's Sabato. "Reporters do not just present information but also question it. Whenever journalists believe government is lying, they now flex their muscles to set policy and even change personnel."

James Rosen, White House correspondent for Fox News Channel who is writing a biography of John Mitchell, describes a "post-Watergate joke" among the modern presidential press corps: "If you're ever stuck for a question to ask the president, you can always fall back on, 'But sir, what about the recent charges?'" – even if you don't know what the allegations are. Rosen says that many White House correspondents "grew up watching Dan Rather challenge Richard Nixon" and have imitated this adversarial approach, even though such questioning may "not necessarily be the best way to elicit information."

But the media's "gotcha" questioning is also the product of White House evasion and duplicity, which has continued since Nixon's resignation. Indeed, just as journalism has grown more aggressive since Watergate, so, too, has political spin. Investigative reporter Polk, now a senior producer at CNN, believes that "politics has changed more as a result of Watergate than journalism has, to the benefit of politicians more than journalists. Even in the Nixon White House, there was at least a camaraderie of proximity among officials who worked near reporters. Now, not only are the doors closed, but administrations are much better at controlling leaks of sensitive information."

Bernstein laments that Watergate's impact on journalism wore off too quickly and that public-service investigative reporting was soon replaced by "a careerist impulse" that emphasized glamour over "doing required legwork and putting information in context." While "great journalism was always the exception not the rule," Bernstein says, "the economics of the business is now the bottom line instead of the best obtainable version of the truth."

Perhaps nothing underscores Watergate's media legacy more than the impeachment of President Clinton a generation later, when partisan attacks and White House posturing reached new lows in saturation coverage on cable TV and the Internet. "A lot of journalists who had been boosters for an aggressive press had trouble squaring that attitude with the coverage of the Lewinsky affair and other Clinton pseudo-scandals," historian Greenberg observes. "Both liberals and conservatives have been unfairly treated by the press. Perhaps it's easier to see when it happens to a president with whom you're sympathetic."

Still, Watergate's most significant impact on journalism has probably been less on the White House beat than on investigative reporting as a whole. The nonprofit organization Investigative Reporters and Editors, founded the year after Nixon's resignation, has grown from a handful of journalists to 5,000 members who regularly receive training in investigative techniques, from filing Freedom of Information Act requests and using computer databases to working undercover and preventing libel suits. Magazines like Mother Jones and television programs like "60 Minutes" – as well as other nonprofit groups and foundations that support investigative reporting – have put down roots in the past 30 years.

Watergate "solidified the critical importance of investigative reporting," says IRE Executive

Director Brant Houston. "All the President's Men" popularized and "humanized investigative reporting," Houston observes, and "provided the inspiration for thousands of young people to become investigative journalists who wanted to make a difference."

Perhaps this, more than anything, helps explain why Watergate's media mythology continues three decades later. As sociologist Schudson wrote: "Who cares if journalism in Watergate was generally lazy? Or if Judge Sirica or some FBI agents were as vital to Nixon's undoing as were Woodward and Bernstein? It does not matter, because the Watergate myth is sustaining. It survives to a large extent impervious to critique. It offers journalism a charter, an inspiration, a reason for being large enough to justify the constitutional protections that journalism enjoys..not to tell us who we are but what we may have been once, what we might again become, what we would be like 'if.'"

Watergate's media mythology lingers, in other words, not because it is true, but because we want it to be true.

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