Chapter Three

Was Watergate a turning point in investigative journalism?

From the outset it is important to note that the scope of this chapter is not to examine in forensic detail the events that eventually came to be known as 'the Watergate scandal' since that has been skilfully and comprehensively covered in various works in the decades since the fateful break-in occurred in the summer of 1972.[1]

However, a general context and narrative arc will be set out for the reader regarding the incident and the subsequent examination of it by the press in order to fully appreciate the importance the Watergate *phenomenon*[2] has come to have in both the American and British investigative journalism worlds. This importance has been highlighted by the likes of Brennen[3]who argues the coverage of the break-in and the investigation of the forces behind it, created an accepted norm in terms of the roles and practices journalists should undertake in Western societies in its aftermath.

What is 'Watergate'?

This chapter will focus specifically on the journalistic players in this drama; the actions taken by those players; the motives behind their actions; and the blueprint this

[1] Strongly recommended would be Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, *All the President's Men* (New York: Touchstone, 1994) 2nd Edition and *The Final Days* (New York: Touchstone, 1994) 2nd Edition written when both were still on staff at *The Washington Post.* Later works which capture both the political and media history of the events and coverage of same which are worth examining include Stantley Kutler, *The Wars of Watergate* (New York: Afred A. Knopf, Inc. 1992) . Also Michael Schudson. *Watergate in American Memory* (New York: Basic Books, 1992)

[2] Oxford English Dictionary: *'Phenomenon: observed or apparent object, fact, or occurrence; remarkable person or thing.'* I regard this as an appropriate term to use inasmuch as many who refer to Watergate are unaware of the details of the crime; the source of the actual name 'Watergate'; the scale of the press investigations; the White House cover-up attempts; the scale of the judicial inquiries into it; or the perceived impact upon the press in the years since.

[3] See Bonnie Brennen's 'Sweat not melodrama: reading the structure of feeling in *All the President's Men,* Journalism: Vol 4.No,1.pp.113-131. (2003). University of Missouri. Columbia.

investigation might – or might not – have left for other journalists undertaking investigations, to utilise.

'Watergate' itself is a loose and interchangeable term that requires some explanation since it has become shorthand for several things. It is for example, still used by senior media industry figures in the UK/USA in the 21st century as both a convenient way of describing the actual June 17th break-in by five burglars at the Democratic National Committee offices at the Watergate office and hotel complex in Washington DC, and also as a catch-all umbrella title for the subsequent press investigations, led chiefly by the *Washington Post* team of Woodward and Bernstein.[4]

This observation is not an implied criticism in any way: it simply shows how 'Watergate' has become both a loose and specific journalistic landmark of sorts which many people in the media refer to, pivot around or even see as a turning point in their perception of what 'investigative journalism' meant and would come to mean.[5]

Therefore, at the beginning of this chapter, It is important to state that the author of this study would argue that the Watergate investigation has come to embody what most journalism commentators and indeed everyday readers and viewers – and now online surfers – would regard as 'investigative journalism'. The unique conjunction of circumstances, cast of characters and high stakes involved in the Watergate story – plus a dash of Hollywood silver-screen magic – meant that the Watergate story became a motif for what investigative journalism meant to most people in the USA, UK and beyond. Consequently this chapter will also explore the reasons why that particular investigation – mostly, but not exclusively, by *The Washington Post* – came to be so important within the context of industry practice.

[4] Interview with Blair Jenkins by Eamonn O'Neill 20/8/05 in which Jenkins, former Head of News and Current Affairs, BBC Scotland, and a journalist for over 30 years, refers to 'Watergate' in both senses repeatedly.

[5] Jenkins, for example states: "My memory might be faulty but it wasn't known as Investigative Journalism. I think people only started using that phrase after Watergate and I preceded Watergate by a couple of years…" BJ Interview by Eamonn O'Neill, 20/8/05.

'Watergate' did not invent 'investigative journalism'

It is important to reiterate, as was demonstrated in the previous chapter, the concept, practice and terminology of 'investigative reporting' was not invented by 'Woodstein'[6] during their inquiries into the Watergate burglary in 1972 – far from it. Important work that was already known in the insular world of the US media on the nation's East Coast as 'investigative reporting' was being carried out in the USA by journalists like Bob Greene at *Newsday* and the use of investigative journalism projects and practices was already reaping rewards in sales of newspapers on the newsstands and a host of major industry awards.

Whilst the likes of Bob Greene was already a veteran in organising investigations along the same lines as his Senate 'racket' inquiries, using a combination of police detective work and legal know-how to identify fruitful areas of investigation that might lead to criminal prosecutions and law changes, the two young reporters who would become journalism legends, had far less promising beginnings and neither of them were trained as investigators or had participated in organised investigative projects like Greene.

Woodward and Bernstein's unremarkable professional roots

Around the timeframe when they were assigned to the Watergate story neither Woodward nor Bernstein was thought of as being future newsroom stars. The former had a reputation for being a rather self-righteous, plodding reporter who produced barely readable, leaden prose; the latter was regarded as a talented writer but a

[6] 'Woodstein' the collective title given to Carl Bernstein and Boob Woodward, then aged 28 and 29 respectively, by their editor at *The Washington Post* Ben Bradlee. This term will be used judiciously by the author of this thesis throughout the study to refer to Woodward and Bernstein when they appear to be operating as a journalism double-act.

somewhat unreliable character.[7] When he was first assigned to look at the 'unusual burglary which had occurred at the Watergate complex he was earning $156.00 per week – a low sum even by 1972 standards.[8] A colleague from that era recalls the pair of them in different ways:

> Woodward… pleased his editors with his shyly deferential manner and conservative dress and habits, which were a welcome change from the brash flamboyance and abrasive egotism of many other young *Post* reporters. His almost adulatory appreciation for all editorial direction, including frequently extensive reworking of his tortuous writing, gave Woodward's editors the rare, satisfying feeling that they were playing important roles in the development of a star reporter.
>
> Unlike Woodward, Bernstein had not been rewarded with such freedom by admiring editors. Instead, he simply established himself beyond their control. He alternatively patronized and argued arrogantly with editors, no matter how senior in years and experience they were. He treated with contempt most assignments they tried to give him… Bernstein often stayed out all night entertaining himself and women on money he borrowed and never returned. This made his working hours erratic and sometimes sleepy and his relations tenuous with co-workers to whom he eventually owed considerable sums of money. Even worse, he was sometimes caught lying his way out of scrapes with editors, which lent worrisome credence to complaints from a few news sources that Bernstein had misquoted them, misrepresented their positions, or written things they said they had told him off the record.

What apparently marked out both writers was the shared but unusual dual quality of being stubborn inasmuch as neither of them would ever 'take no for an answer'[9] when they were seeking out material for their stories and also the fact that both young men shared a professional character trait of being what would now be termed 'self starters' - in other words, they routinely assigned themselves their own projects and stories.

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[7] Len Downie, *The New Muckrakers* (New York: New Republic, 1976). See Chapter 1 which deals with 'The Stardust Twins of the Washington Post.'

[8] See interview with Alicia Shephard, author of *Woodward and Bernstein: Life in the Shadow of Watergate,* at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/video/2007/05/23/VI2007052301318.html?hpid=topnews

[9] Carl Bernstein in Downie, p3.

Whilst the former trait is not unknown amongst tough-minded and focused reporters, the latter characteristic is much rarer since, if misunderstood, could be interpreted by managers as being a form of arrogance or even professional insubordination. A senior colleague of Woodward and Bernstein, and someone who has written extensively about their work as investigative journalists, Downie explained in more detail what he witnessed working alongside them:

> Woodward assigned himself to better stories, which he pursued during his daylight time off… In this way, during his first nine months at the *Washington Post*, all *before* the Watergate burglary, Bob Woodward accumulated more front-page by-lines than any of the other sixty reporters on the newspaper's metropolitan staff. "I just sat down and thought of what I ought to be going after – it was all obvious stuff," Woodward later explained with his characteristic Midwestern bluntness. "I was always astounded that more reporters didn't do the same thing. I guess you have to have a compulsive need to succeed. You have to be insecure and to want desperately to please your boss."[10]

Yet it might also be argued that this approach identified both reporters as journalists who didn't follow the day-to-day pre-planned route-map of stories that editors assigned. Equally this singular characteristic, it could be suggested, identified them as independent thinkers and is – as mentioned in previous chapters in this study – one of the required hallmarks of anyone aspiring to be an investigative journalist. But these are traits that were perhaps attributed to them after they'd become journalistic stars and at the time they were routinely assigned to the Watergate story, the same approaches might just as easily hindered their reputations. Nevertheless, such individuals know – either by design or instinct – that important stories are rarely to be found in official press releases, news editor's diary items, nor by them attending official press conferences. They tend to increasingly look askance at participating in this kind of reporting as their career progresses.

[10] See Downie p.2.

Even so, neither Woodward nor Bernstein has ever claimed that they were *aware* that they were suited to 'investigative' reporting. Downie, for example, flatly asserts in *The New Muckrakers* that: '[Bob] Woodward had not set out to become what was known in newspapering as an 'investigative reporter'. Downie believes that Woodward was only vaguely aware of the 19th century roots of the term and brand of journalism known as 'muckraking' in the USA: Bernstein, though, was aware of it but saw himself more in the mould of the 'New Journalism' movement.[11] He was a bit of an urban hippy, wore fashionable bohemian clothes, let his hair grow, professed some degree of non-materialism (whilst liking his bikes and stereo equipment) and was familiar with radical Left-wing politics since his parents were both members of the Communist Party and were persecuted by the FBI in the 1950s. (This was not unlike the way many at Granada TV's *World in* Action saw themselves: many had been Left-leaning social activists and dissenters; ex-film producers attracted by a new film-making tradition in social realism; and documentary making self-styled 'storytellers' keen to give airtime to parts of UK society previously untapped whether is be bus drivers, victims of insurance frauds or openly gay men).

And yet, as so many times in examining whether a 'formula' exists for investigative journalism, contradictions abound: whilst Woodward and Bernstein would be later seen as the ultimate reporting team, the two men were very different.

[11] The Term 'muckraking' – a negative description for a certain kind of journalism which is akin to 'filth on the floor' i.e. excrement - dates back to a 1906 speech made by President Theodore Roosevelt in which he mentioned the allegorical novel first published in 1678 *The Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan. Roosevelt stated that journalists were similar to Bunyan's 'Man with the Muckrake' who: 'typifies the man in this life [who] consistently refuses to see aught that is lofty, and fixes his eyes with solemn intentness only on that which is vile and debasing. Now, it is very necessary that we should not flinch from seeing what is vile and debasing. There is filth on the floor, and it must be scraped up with the muckraker; and there are times and places where this service is most needed of all the services that can be performed. But the man who never does anything else, who never thinks, or speaks or writes save his feats with the muckrake, speedily becomes, not a help to society, not an incitement to good, but one of the potent forces of evil.'

Woodward was known to be a staid, deferential to authority, Republican, with little in the way of an identifiable radical streak in political terms. He went after his journalistic quarry for very different reasons. In later years, one of the strands of his motivation was revealed when he admitted that as a child he used to look through his father's legal files and read the secrets of the townspeople in the place where he was raised. He has often cited this vague – but specific – little personal anecdote as one of the reasons he likes uncovering secrets and dealing with cold, hard documents. This is very different from the wider-social, moral and cultural goals other investigative journalists have sometimes cited by way of explaining what it is that motivates them to do what they do.

The crucial point being made here is that both Woodward and Bernstein didn't begin their inquiries into the Watergate burglary because of a *preconceived* mission they set themselves (although their self-starting talents helped them flourish once they were on the case). Nor, it should be noted, did either of them start out with a private or professional goal to 'muckrake' dirt on the White House or President Richard Nixon. Woodward was avowedly apolitical at the time and was only assigned the story because he was a hard worker and was available. Bernstein also fell into the Watergate story by chance, since – as he often did – he sniffed a powerful story in-the-making and elbowed his way onto the investigation in its early hours when he instinctively realised it might prove fruitful in generating a by-line for him during one of his frequent fallow periods.

The editorial team in place in 1972 who were in charge of sending out Bob Woodward the morning after the discovery of the Watergate burglary has since stated

on the record that it simply saw the burglary as 'an unusual crime story, not as a political scandal.'[12]

So it was almost by chance that Woodward attended the arraignment of the five Watergate burglars before Judge John Sirica on Sunday 18th June 1972, and overheard one of the burglars – James W. McCord Jr – quietly identify himself to the judge as a former employee of the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency). Having said that, a culture of support for exploring for possible stories existed in the newsroom, one encouraged by Ben Bradlee.

Whilst Woodward began investigating this intriguing detail, it should be noted that the unseen wheels of justice had already begun turning and the Washington DC's district attorney's office had already started investigating links between this man and the CIA. The original *Washington Post* coverage of the Watergate burglary was kick-started with an article written by veteran police reporter Alfred E. Lewis who had the long-standing police-beat contacts to discover that McCord had White House connections.[13] Only in a footnote – that would become of historical significance – are the names 'Woodward and Bernstein' mentioned as helpful contributors to the larger piece by Lewis. But within 24 hours, both young reporters would turn up a link between the burglar McCord and the CRP (Committee to Re-Elect the President) where he was a salaried employee.[14]Initially however, Woodward and Bernstein were as far from 'star' reporters as one could possibly imagine.

The progression of *The Washington Post's* Watergate investigation

[12] See comments accompanying photograph of convicted burglars at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/flash/photo/politics/watergate/movie.htm
[13] See *Washington Post* article *'5 Held in Plot to Bug Democrats' Office Here' June 18th, 1972:* http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2002/05/31/AR2005111001227.html
[14] See *Washington Post* article *'GOP Security Aide Among Five Arrested in Bugging Affair' June 19th, 1972: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2002/05/31/AR2005111001228.html*

The later breakthroughs by the Woodstein team on the Watergate story occurred in piecemeal fashion and unfolded via relatively short (usually under 400 words in length) news articles in *The Washington Post.*

Looking back from a distance of three decades or more, this seems rather quaint and somewhat unusual, since 'investigations' as a concept are often seen nowadays as something that emerge from dedicated teams (like Bob Greene's example in Chapter Two) which produce lengthy 'Big Reads'. In post-Watergate newspaper investigations the eventual stories were often presented in the form of one much larger 'News feature' (sometimes around 2,000 words in length); sometimes it was part of a series of features which ran into many thousands of words; or it was one large magazine-type feature of a similar long length. One of the unique facets to the Watergate investigation by the *Post* was that it began and stayed for the most part, as a series of news pieces. Only in the book *All the President's Men* subsequently written by Woodward and Bernstein, did the reading public have the story laid out in front of them in a sweeping narrative form, with all the characters, plot lines and pace of a thriller-type novel. Initially, the stories were placed amongst the usual daily fare of news items and were not bannered as being the fruit of dedicated teams, unusual projects by specialist writers or one-off 'investigations'. In retrospect, It is clear they were simply a series of news stories, one building upon the other, revealing a hidden picture one piece at a time, which indicated partial answers and generated more questions along the way. Journalist and historian, Richards Reeves, speaking at a symposium on the press and the Nixon White House at the University of Texas where Woodward and Bernstein's Watergate notes are now located, commented in February 2005 that:

> Whatever the… papers show… a critical part of the story is nowhere in the boxes opened here… It was about the willingness of *The Washington Post*

> (and later other outlets) to continue publishing less-than-sensational stories attacking or chipping away at the power of government – week after week, month after month. That was done even as the government denied it al and threatened the owners of the *Post* with the loss of things like the Federal Communications Commission licenses of *Post*-owned television stations… Above and behind the often confused and sometimes inaccurate young men were the publisher of the *Post*, Katherine Graham, and her editor, Ben Bradlee, who hung tough when it counted.[15]

The major political and historical works published years afterwards on the Nixon White House revealed not so much a scandal singular, but more a series of scandals that had emanated from the administration. Therefore, although they didn't know it at the time, the *Post's* investigation of the June 17th burglary and the issues attached to it was really only one aspect of a much larger story. But, in true storytelling fashion, it gave the journalists the vehicle that they could use to take the readers inside the mess they went on to discover and reveal.

By illustrating a link between one of the burglars, McCord, then the CIA and finally the Committee to Re-Elect the President (CREEP), it gave the readers a glimpse of the coupling between a seedy and illegal event on one hand and the hidden forces of power inside the White House and Intelligence community on the other.

When the book version of *All the President's Men* was released in 1974, the public learned for the first time of Woodward's secret source dubbed 'Deep Throat' after the porn movie of the same name that was then doing the rounds. The reason the name given to the source by editor Simons was so appropriate was because the source was speaking to Woodward on 'Deep Background'. This source was, said Woodward:

> …in the Executive Branch [and] had access to information at CREEP as well as at the White House. His identity was unknown to anyone else. He could be contacted only on very important occasions. Woodward had promised he would never identify him or his position to anyone. Further, he had agreed never to quote the man, even as an anonymous source. Their discussions

[15] Reprinted comments from Reeves in 'Watergate's Last Chapter' from *Vanity Fair* magazine (October 2005) by Carl Bernstein.

> would be only to confirm information that had been obtained elsewhere and to add some perspective. In newspaper terminology, this meant the discussions were on "deep background."[16]

It was Deep Throat who first indicated that a massive scandal was occurring inside the White House using up to 50 agents – including E. Howard Hunt, a former CIA man whose name was in McCord's address book seized by police and revealed to Bob Woodward after the Watergate burglary - to sabotage the Democrats' chances in the upcoming 1972 general election. Of particular interest to this group, for example, was the activities who of Democratic Senator Teddy Kennedy, who Nixon literally hated and feared because of the assumed presidential ambitions of the remaining Kennedy brother.

Later it would emerge that Nixon had had a taping system installed in the Oval Office[17] that allowed him to secretly record conversations. The transcript of the June 23rd 1972 meeting between the President and his Chief of Staff, H.R. 'Bob' Haldeman, mentioned the pair of them discussing using the CIA to thwart the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) inquiries. This was illegal.

It also emerged that more dirty tricks were afoot under the management of former FBI man, G. Gordon Liddy and Howard Hunt, who were both part of a White House 'Special Investigations Unit' rather lamely dubbed 'The Plumbers' because its main task was to plug the leaks emanating from White House staff at the time.[18] Eventually the Woodward and Bernstein stories would crucially link the illegal activities of the likes of Liddy and Hunt, to senior White House officials like Attorney General, John Mitchell.

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[16] Woodward and Bernstein, *All the President's Men* (New York: Touchstone, 1994) 2nd Edition, p.71

[17] He wasn't the first President to do this: both John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Baines Johnson also taped meetings. They used the system somewhat more judiciously than their successor however.

[18] 'The Plumbers' were more sinister than their semi-comical title suggests and were, for example, involved in illegal break-ins including the raiding of Daniel Ellsberg's office, when the psychiatrist and former Pentagon and State Dept. employee was thought (correctly) to have leaked the Pentagon Papers, which contained political damaging information on the extent of the US' illegal war in Cambodia.

In the years since Watergate occurred, It is been common practice to conflate the crime and the investigation as one entity. The following chapter breaks down the journalistic investigation into a series of elements and explains how their use and innovation helped subsequent investigations.