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All the President’s Men

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Media Writing 1:00

All the President’s Men depicts the factual account of two investigative journalists with the Washington Post, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, and their investigation into the burglary of the Watergate building that eventually led to the resignation of President Nixon. The movie was made in 1976 and is an American political thriller based on the true events from the book written in 1974. Woodward and Bernstein set a standard of excellence for investigative reporting. Their work exemplifies an ideal for American journalism, illustrating the value and importance of a free press. As investigative journalists they dug deep into the story of a simple break-in of the Watergate building that ultimately exposed corruption at the highest level of the federal government.

During the investigation Woodward and Bernstein are forced to take some risks and short cuts to get at the heart of the story. On a few occasions they cross a line. Woodward and Bernstein have different styles and interview techniques to get the information they seek. Woodward appears more respectful and stays calm when interviewing sources whereas Bernstein is more aggressive than Woodward. In a scene with a fellow reporter Woodward asks if she goes with a guy that works for the Committee to Re-elect. The reporter states she is no longer involved with that guy and did not want to contact him to get a list of employees on the Committee to Re-elect that Woodstein wanted. Bernstein tells her she is looking good since that breakup and they all share a laugh. Bernstein pushes, it’s over what do you have to lose. Woodward senses her reluctance to help and says, “Forget it, we don’t want you to do anything that would embarrass you or you don’t feel right about.” Bernstein thought they should have kept pushing. In the end, the reporter provided the list to Woodward.

Bernstein also flirts with a source at an outdoor restaurant and he also tends to laugh and make light of things to get those sources to relax and open up. Bernstein also tricks a receptionist at the Miami Dade’s ADA’s office to see the phone and money records for Mr. Barker, one of the people that broke into the Watergate. From those records he discovered a check for $25,000 from Mr. Dahlberg.

Bernstein visits the bookkeeper for the Committee to Re-elect at night in her home where she might be more open to discuss what she knows. The bookkeeper doesn’t want to name names, so Bernstein suggests he say initials and that way the bookkeeper isn’t divulging any information. She reluctantly shakes her head when initials are stated. After that she states she doesn’t want to say anything else, Bernstein pushes to revisit the facts already provided.

When Woodward hears that the bookkeeper would only nod to initials, he wants to go back and get her to say the names of those involved handling the finances that financed the break-in. Bernstein, who spent a fair amount of time with her, said she won’t provide the names except if “you’re going to have to trick her or threaten her.” In the end, they did trick her. Bernstein: “we try to fake her out”. Woodward: “We go back there and ask her who P is. Then I say no, no we know P is Porter”. To the bookkeeper Woodward states “You said $25,000, is that how much Porter got? Was Magruder the only M to receive money?” Despite the reluctance of the bookkeeper to divulge any information the tenacity of Woodstein causes her to cave and provide what she knew.

Many of the technical aspects of the film enhance the journalistic styles used by Woodstein. The use of light and dark was one such technique. When we see the reporters in the newsroom it is well-lit. Light here represents truth and knowledge whereas the dark scenes represent ignorance and corruption. When we see Woodward in a garage meeting the confidential informant, Deep Throat, it is dark. Deep throat says he won’t tell Woodward facts, but will listen to the facts that Woodward has and help keep the investigation on track. Deep Throat lights a cigarette to show a little glimpse of the mystery being brought to light.

Another film technique that is used is during the scene where Woodward and Bernstein are in the reading room of the Library of Congress. Here they are searching through countless records of requests by the Nixon White House, looking for evidence related to Ted Kennedy. This scene shows the enormity of the task at hand-not just in going through the library records, but also in uncovering the corruption of the administration. In comparison, it shows how small the two journalists are in comparison to the administration. This perspective is also evident as they are driving around and reading a list of employees for the Committee to Re-elect. The camera pans out to see the city. Both these techniques give the idea that Woodstein is looking for a needle in the haystack.

Early in the movie there is a meeting of Post editors where one states, “It’s a dangerous story for the paper. What if your boys get it wrong?” Bradlee states, “Then it’s our ass and we’ll have to go out and work for a living. “Bradlee thought the story was “thin” on several occasions meaning they didn’t have enough corroborated facts. While Bradlee continues to push Woodstein to get more facts and credible sources, he is supportive of the process and believed in the story.

When Woodstein think they have something notable, they take it to the editors to review. Due to the nature of the story that Woodstein was investigating many of the sources they sought information from wanted to remain anonymous. This is a problem for the journalists as the editor wanted named, verifiable sources. In a pivotal scene, Executive Editor Ben Bradlee states, “God dam it, when is somebody going to go on the record on this story?” Despite the anonymous sources used and the denials from those accused of wrong doing, the Post stood behind Woodstein, and we see Bradlee scribble a note that reads “We stand by our story.”

In Bradlee’s days as a staff reporter he got a tip about a replacement for J. Edgar Hoover which he wrote about. The day it appeared, Hoover was appointed to the FBI for life. He took a lot of heat for this and others were saying, “You did it, Bradlee, you screwed-up you stuck us with Hoover forever. “Bradlee admitted to Woodstein that he screwed up, but wasn’t wrong. Perhaps it was this experience that caused Bradlee to give Woodstein some freedom to pursue their story and stand by them.

Bradlee understands the enormity of the story. In a scene toward the end of the movie he says to Woodstein, “You’re under a lot of pressure and you put us here. Nothing is riding on this except the First Amendment of the Constitution, freedom of the press and maybe the future of the country.”

In investigating the Watergate scandal, Woodstein went beyond the reporting of facts. They spent tireless hours researching, investigating, checking and cross checking sources and uncovered evidence of corruption in the Nixon administration. They set a new standard for journalistic excellence. Their techniques at times crossed the line but they provided considerable information of the corruption in the Nixon administration. Had they not been so vigilant in their pursuit of the truth, perhaps the American people would not have known about the Watergate scandal and Nixon would not have resigned. All the President’s Men is a testament to why a free press is essential in a democracy.