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<tr>
<td>Year:</td>
<td>2013</td>
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<td>Journal:</td>
<td>Screen Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Volume:</td>
<td>69</td>
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<td>Pages:</td>
<td>122-127</td>
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Paper Trailblazers

Investigating Democracy in *All the President’s Men*

ALEXANDRA HELLER-NICHOLAS
All the President’s Men (Alan J Pakula, 1976) is a gritty, realistic political thriller that seeks to fictionally document one of the most notorious political scandals of the twentieth century. Focusing on the investigation that led to the shameful resignation of President Richard Nixon on 9 August 1974, it follows the work of the two journalists responsible for exposing the so-called Watergate scandal. But despite its sombre mood, by focusing on the determination of these two journalists the film ultimately celebrates the very system of government that it appears to call into question, emphasising their success in the face of overwhelming political corruption. That two normal Americans could bring down a corrupt administration speaks not of the flaws of the political system, but rather its strengths. From this perspective, All the President’s Men can be best understood as a monument to democracy in action.

On 17 June 1972, five men were apprehended inside the Democratic National Committee headquarters that were housed in the Watergate Complex in Washington, DC. What first appeared to be a simple break-in would lead to the resignation of President Richard Nixon just over two years later. While initially there was little interest in the story of what appeared to be a small-scale burglary, the perseverance of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, two journalists for The Washington Post, raised the profile of the case and provided the foundations for their book All the President’s Men, and the film of the same name that was released in 1976. Woodward and Bernstein’s investigation won their newspaper a prestigious Pulitzer Prize, and the movie, directed by Alan J Pakula, was nominated for numerous awards including eight Oscars (of which it won four).

The events that linked the initial break-in to the downfall of a president were complex and involved a range of high-ranking officials. Although these people wielded great power in the behind-the-scenes politicking of Washington at the time, many of their names were not publicly known. The burglary was funded by the Committee for the Re-Election of the President, a group of Republicans campaigning to keep Nixon in office at the 1972 election. The break-in was not the only clandestine activity associated with Nixon’s administration, and the word ‘Watergate’ became synonymous with the scandal that concerned a number of secret and sometimes even illegal activities. So notorious was the term that its suffix is now widely used to describe other political controversies, such as the recent ‘Hackgate’ investigation into allegations that Rupert Murdoch’s UK newspaper News of the World hacked into the voicemails of celebrities, sport stars and even the families of murder victims.1

Investigating Watergate

A total of sixty-nine people were charged in relation to the scandal for crimes including burglary, perjury, obstruction of justice, wiretapping and conspiracy, forty-eight of whom pled guilty. Among those charged were powerful figures such as the attorney general, John Mitchell; Nixon’s chief of staff, HR Haldeman; and the head of the Committee for the Re-Election of the President, Jeb Magruder. Testimony given at the Senate Watergate Committee hearing exposed the fact that Nixon had also recorded numerous conversations in his office, and Nixon’s initial refusal to hand over these tapes contributed to a widely held belief that he was personally involved in the cover-up. Nixon was forced to resign to avoid being impeached after the US Supreme Court ruled that he must hand over the tapes to investigators.

The film of All the President’s Men (and the book upon which it was based) follows Woodward and Bernstein’s investigation into the Watergate break-in, which led them to progressively higher-ranking government officials. Their book covers the period from the break-in until the resignation of Haldeman and Nixon’s aide John Ehrlichman on 30 April 1973, and the revelation a few months later by Alexander Butterfield that Nixon had been recording conversations in his office. The film, however, focuses only on the first seven months of the investigation; it ends when Nixon is inaugurated for his second presidential term in early 1973, and provides only a brief coda that summarises the events that ultimately forced his resignation.

But is All the President’s Men a film about politics or journalism, or both? In his 1976 review, Roger Ebert forcefully argues that the public’s knowledge of the circumstances surrounding Nixon’s resignation at the time of the film’s release brought a sense of urgency and context to the movie.2 This left the film free to focus solely on the nuts-and-bolts details of the journalists’ investigation. As Ebert notes, it does not glamourise this process as many other films about journalism tend to do, and instead emphasises the mundanity of chasing false leads and the time-consuming ‘grunt’ work involved in the profession. This is clear in the montage that shows Woodward (Robert Redford) and Bernstein (Dustin Hoffman) visiting...
Mainstream Hollywood fictional films almost uniformly employ a musical score, and that this type of music does not appear in Pakula’s film until the library sequence aligns the film with documentary re-enactments more than with Hollywood blockbusters.

all the employees of the Committee for the Re-Election of the President, and in the sequence where they sift through request slips in the White House library. Ebert’s argument here suggests the viewing experience for audiences new to All the President’s Men may be a complicated one: if viewers are not aware of the political intensity of the period, and do not know the shock that Nixon’s resignation caused not only in the United States but around the world, how will the film engage them? The answer to this, of course, is through the plight – and eventual victory – of Woodward and Bernstein themselves. The focus on Woodward and Bernstein’s investigation in All the President’s Men means the film is much more a celebration of the everyman’s ability to return America to its assumed ethically righteous status quo than it is a pessimistic exposure of the corruption that sullied it.

Taking sides

Aside from aligning the audience morally with Woodward and Bernstein, Pakula’s film engages audiences today in a number of other ways. The first of these relates to his role as director. Pakula has been closely linked to what is now called the ‘conspiracy film’ subgenre, and he directed such classics in this category such as The Parallax View (1974) with Warren Beatty,
and *Klute* (1971) with Jane Fonda. Along with other conspiracy movies of this era, Pakula’s films reflected the widespread sense of distrust and disillusionment that people felt towards governments and other powerful individuals and institutions in a climate where the Vietnam War and Watergate were hotly debated topics; in regard to the latter, Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Conversation* (1974) even concerned a protagonist who recorded private discussions.

*All the President’s Men* also employs familiar strategies from other genres. Evidence of its debt to film noir exists even in its formal construction: the dark, shadowy locations where Woodward meets his mysterious source nicknamed ‘Deep Throat’, and the chiaroscuro cinematography of familiar noir iconography such as venetian blinds in the opening burglary sequence. Powerful depictions of alienation, paranoia and of a moral universe thrown into disarray are also crucial to both film noir and *All the President’s Men*.

The film’s foundations in true events link it to the documentary form, a kinship borne out in the film’s stylistic approach. The early part of the film in particular is noteworthy for its absence of non-diegetic music. Mainstream Hollywood fictional films almost uniformly employ a musical score, and that this type of music does not appear in Pakula’s film until the library sequence aligns the film with documentary re-enactments more
than with Hollywood blockbusters. Even aside from its basis in historical fact, the film creates this sense of documentary realism by including real-life media from the time: television clips, particularly those of the real Richard Nixon at key public moments during his career, and newspaper headlines from *The Washington Post* serve as documentary evidence offered from within the world of the film to support its claims of authenticity.

This sense of authenticity is crucial to *All the President’s Men*. Much attention has been paid to the filmmakers’ determination to accurately replicate the original Washington Post office where the real-life investigation was based: office desks were bought from the same company and painted exactly the same colours, and litter from Post journalists’ desks was even provided to furnish the set. This attention to detail in constructing a believable world is fundamental to the film’s ultimately positive message. At the time of its release, it would perhaps have been superfluous to focus on the well-known political aspects of the controversy. What was not so well known, by contrast, was the hard work of the two journalists who played such a significant role in exposing the government’s involvement in criminal conspiracy. The more authentic Woodward and Bernstein’s story was, the more strongly *All the President’s Men* underscores its primary concern with the positive moral trajectory of its investigators and their eventual triumph over a corrupt administration. The government may be corrupt, but the system – by allowing people like Woodward and Bernstein to make a difference – is not. The more verity there is to their story, the more firmly entrenched this central message is.

Audiences at the time of the film’s release were encouraged to align themselves morally with the film’s heroes in other ways, too. The casting of Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman is significant here, as these were two of the biggest stars in Hollywood at the time. Redford in particular had a reputation as a sex symbol, and Hoffman was considered one of the finest actors of the period. The film in a sense can also be considered Redford’s as much as Pakula’s: Redford bought the rights to the original book in 1974 for US$450,000, and he and Pakula spent a great deal of time together making adjustments to William Goldman’s adapted script.5

Despite its focus on the minutiae of Bernstein and Woodward’s investigation – the names, the dates, the telephone numbers and the seemingly never-ending runarounds – it is the success of the investigation itself, and not its specific content, that contains the movie’s central message. Much attention is placed on the quotidian banality of Woodward and Bernstein’s professional lives, not to play down the importance of it but to highlight their status as everymen. This is a political film at its heart, but one with a much broader – and perhaps surprisingly, much more optimistic – declaration propelling it: like Woodward and Bernstein, *All the President’s Men* suggests that anyone can make a difference in America. Honesty, hard work, determination and perseverance are privileged in this film as an antidote to a system riddled with corruption, deceit, greed and lies. On its surface, then, while Pakula’s film offers a historical context as part of the conspiracy genre of the 1970s, it also fits into another, more idealistic category alongside *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (Frank Capra, 1939). The rosy optimism of
Capra’s earlier political drama may seem worlds away from Pakula’s gritty portrait of 1970s Washington, but the two are united in a fundamentally ideological mission: to celebrate the American spirit as inherently good, and the country’s system of government – even when exposed as having visible and undeniable faults – as one that will always bounce back into the shape of that goodness, no matter how much it has been tarnished.

There have since been other films that have focused specifically on Nixon’s involvement in the Watergate cover-up and his eventual downfall, most notably Nixon (Oliver Stone, 1995) and Frost/Nixon (Ron Howard, 2008). But while these films focus on the melodrama and epic scale of the president’s notorious downfall, the shift in focus in All the President’s Men to the nitty-gritty detail of Woodward and Bernstein’s investigation inherently represents American ideals. It is from this perspective that Pakula’s film is optimistic, and has an inherently pro-American ideological agenda. Its focusing on wrongdoing in the highest echelons of government ultimately supports and celebrates the American system of government not because it was corrupted in the first place, but because that corruption was exposed and punished. That it was propelled by the determination and hard work of two journalists who had little support from their industry peers and who were even threatened physically speaks of the fundamental American faith in democracy: that anyone can make a difference and change their country for the better.

Alexandra Heller-Nicholas is a visiting fellow at the Institute for Social Research at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne. Her 2011 book Rape-Revenge Films: A Critical Study is available through McFarland & Co., and her next book on found-footage horror films is to be released in 2013.

Endnotes

1 Perhaps fittingly, Woodward and Bernstein have also been actively involved in the media attention around Rupert Murdoch and his News Corporation empire since Hackgate. For more information, see Carl Bernstein’s article on Woodward’s discovery of recordings linking Murdoch to US politics: ‘Why the US Media Ignored Murdoch’s Brazen Bid to Hijack the Presidency’, The Guardian, 20 December 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/dec/20/bernstomiurdoch-ailes-petreaus-presidency>, accessed 17 January 2013.


3 After decades of speculation, in 2005 ‘Deep Throat’ was finally revealed as Mark Felt, a high-ranking official at the FBI.

4 ibid.


6 ibid.