

## CELLULOID HISTORIANS

### UNDERSTANDING WATERGATE THROUGH “ALL THE PRESIDENT’S MEN”

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On 17<sup>th</sup> June 1972 security guard Frank Wills stumbled upon a break-in at the Watergate Office building in Washington D.C., initiating perhaps the biggest political scandal in American history. The ensuing two year investigation into the attempted burglary of the National Democratic Party Headquarters would eventually uncover a complex web of corruption, abuse of power and a political cover-up that shocked the world. The scandal resulted in the firing and eventual imprisonment of high ranking government officials including White House Chief of Staff H.R. Haldeman and Attorney General John Mitchell, as well as the first ever resignation of an American President, Richard M. Nixon.

As the Watergate scandal was unfolding a young actor/producer, Robert Redford, began to take an interest in the work of Woodward and Bernstein (Toplin, *History by Hollywood* 181). Redford was impressed by the dedication of the two journalists in uncovering revelations that had been ignored by the rest of the media. He felt the story had the potential to be made into a feature film, focusing on Woodward and Bernstein’s experience. After initial reluctance, the two journalists agreed to assist in the making of a film, resulting in a landmark in historical filmmaking, *All the President’s Men* (Pakula).

The film would go on to become the most well known historical account of the scandal. Emmanuel Levy suggests that “*All the President’s* has become an historical document, an official version of the Watergate scandal” (n.d.). Released during the re-election campaign of Nixon’s successor Gerald Ford, the film performed well at the box-office<sup>1</sup> and was often referenced as contributing to the defeat of Ford by Jimmy Carter. The formerly obscure journalists, Woodward and Bernstein, became as well-known as the politicians involved; while their mysterious informant, ‘Deep Throat’, became a historical enigma that intrigued the public for the following thirty years.

Much of the lasting influence of *All the President’s Men* as an historical record of the Watergate scandal can be attributed to the filmmaker’s methods of constructing the film. The credibility of the film as a plausible portrayal of history relies heavily on the verisimilitude that characterises *All the President’s Men*. Both director Alan J. Pakula and

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<sup>1</sup> The film grossed \$30 million domestically in 1976, making it the fifth highest grossing film of the year. It would go on to gross \$70 million in the U.S.A. (<http://www.boxofficereport.com/database/1976.shtml>)

producer Robert Redford recognised the importance of maintaining historical accuracy in the film and went to great lengths to achieve it. They complemented this verisimilitude by utilising primary sources such as newspapers, radio broadcasts and archival news footage to further heighten the films credibility.

Further, *All the President's Men* contains numerous examples of the power of cinematic elements such as lighting, cinematography, editing and sound design, in manipulating an audience. Many of the messages in the film are transmitted or re-enforced to the audience through the use of these devices. The skill of the filmmakers in constructing a complex cinematic construction of the Watergate scandal greatly aids the believability of the film.

There are a variety of ways to analyse the impact that *All the President's Men* has had on the public consciousness. One of the most fascinating aspects of the film is the fact that it was produced and released almost immediately after the Watergate scandal broke. Unlike most historical films, *All the President's Men* portrayed history that was still fresh in the mind of the public; whose effects were still very much being felt.

The film's release coincided with the United States presidential election of 1976 between Republican President Gerald Ford and Democratic candidate Jimmy Carter. Gerald Ford had been promoted to the position of Vice-President in 1973, following the dismissal of Spiro Agnew over a Watergate related scandal, and subsequently to the Presidency, following Nixon's resignation. While he had no direct involvement with the Watergate scandal and was never implicated in any wrongdoing, Ford's strong connection to the Nixon administration, and his later pardoning of Nixon, placed him in a precarious position during the election. As stated earlier, *All the President's Men* did solid box-office upon its release, and has often been attributed to Ford losing the 1976 election.

While the film does not directly implicate Ford, he is seen with Nixon in one piece of archival footage. It provided voters with a clear reminder of the scandal, along with an easily consumed summary of events, condensed into a two hour film. The Watergate scandal had dragged on for four years and was an extremely complex issue to follow in the newspapers. Robinson (1975) acknowledges that many Americans had become uninterested in the issue, wishing to move past such an embarrassing time for their country. *All the President's Men* put Watergate back in the national consciousness, demonstrating the corruption of the Republican administration. Ford went on to lose the election to Jimmy Carter. While there were obviously many factors contributing to Ford's defeat, the film was widely attributed with effecting the outcome of the election. Ronald Reagan, then Governor of California, claimed that the film cost the Republicans the Presidency (Levy), while newly elected President Jimmy Carter chose *All the President's Men* as the first film to be screened at the White House during his presidency (Levy). Elliot and Schenck's study of *All the President's Men* confirmed that the release of the film had a major impact in determining the outcome of the election. Elliot and Schenck surveyed college age voters to determine whether the film influenced their voting decision, with results overwhelmingly suggesting that the film was a key factor influencing young voters. For a film to effect the result of a United States Presidential election speaks enormously of its impact on public consciousness.

The lasting effect *All the President's Men* has had on public understanding of the Watergate Scandal goes beyond the immediate impact that it had at the time of its release. Watergate has become a byword for political scandal, frequently referenced in news media across the world. Yet, understanding of the intricacies of the scandal by the general public has become increasingly diminished. Watergate has become a simplified narrative drama; the series of events that lead to the downfall of Richard Nixon. While a plethora of written material has been published about the scandal, much by leading Watergate figures, *All the President's Men* remains the most comprehensive and well known cinematic depiction of Watergate. James Monaco acknowledges that the film "attracted viewers mainly because it helped explain how Watergate happened and people wanted to hear that..." (74). The film stands as the most accessible and entertaining means of understanding the scandal without delving into the complexity of the literature.

The role that *All the President's Men* has played in creating the narrative perspective of Watergate can be seen in the characterisation of key figures in the scandal. While history will always represent Richard Nixon as the villain of the Watergate saga, the heroes of the narrative have become Woodward and Bernstein. The two journalists often referred to by the media as 'Woodstein' have become synonymous with Watergate, and indeed have become the archetype of the investigative journalist. In *Reel History*, Toplin observes that little attention in the Watergate story is ever paid to other key players, such as Archibald Cox (Special Prosecutor), John Sirica (Chief Judge) or Sam Ervin (Chairman of the Watergate Senate Committee). The legislature and judiciary involved in investigating and prosecuting Watergate crimes were vital in the eventual toppling of Richard M. Nixon; however, it is Woodward and Bernstein who rose to national prominence on the back of their Watergate stories, with their lasting public notoriety relying heavily on their depiction by Hollywood luminaries Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman.

Apart from promoting the role of Woodward and Bernstein in the Watergate saga, *All the President's Men* established another prominent figure, Deep Throat. The mysterious government insider who helped the two journalists in their investigation has become one of the most well known characters of the Watergate scandal, regularly referenced and parodied in the media. Speculation as to the identity of Deep Throat was constantly seen in various publications and productions until 2005 when he finally revealed himself to be former Associate Director of the FBI, W. Mark Felt. The revelation of the identity of Deep Throat, some 30 years after Watergate, was international news, receiving enormous media attention. The excitement surrounding the identity of Deep Throat further indicates the important role that *All the President's Men* has played in developing public understanding of Watergate. Deep Throat was an unknown figure in the saga as it unfolded; only in the aftermath, in his depiction in the film (as well as the book), did he become a prominent figure.

*All the President's Men* is unique amongst historical films, in that it presents an historical event that had only recently occurred when the film was originally released. This created a major challenge for the filmmakers when considering how to tell the story to the audience. Watergate had been a news story that had featured in the mass media on a daily basis for two years prior to the film's release and involved some of the most well known political figures in the United States. The filmmakers therefore had to assume that the

audience would have some knowledge of the scandal prior to viewing the film. This is reflected in the film by the limited background information about the historical figures involved. While the roles of some of the more obscure figures, such as Presidential Advisor Charles Colson, are explained in the film, generally names are mentioned under the assumption that the audience will know who they are and what role they played in the government. The film assumes that the audience knows the people involved in the scandal, and thus focuses on the intricacies of their actions.

While this approach avoided presenting redundant information to the audience, it creates a problem for a contemporary audience. Many of the intricacies of *All the President's Men* can be difficult to follow without some prior understanding of Watergate and the historical figures involved. As a means of understanding history for a modern audience, the film provides an entry point to further inquiry. It presents the audience with the story of the two journalist's investigation and stops as the enormity of the scandal has just become apparent. In this way it encourages the audience to explore further, to discover the broader implications of the scandal that the film hints at but never fully examines.

One of the most immediately obvious elements of *All the Presidents Men* is the attention to detail. Toplin notes that "the makers of *All the President's Men* ... gave careful attention to detail, appearing to reproduce the past as it really was" (*History by Hollywood* 21). It is clear that the filmmakers recognised that for the film to have a high level of credibility, it must appear to be accurate in its depiction of the Watergate investigation.

Adherence to verisimilitude is most evident in the settings used throughout the film. Many historically significant locations are seen in the film and most were shot on location. The sequence in the Library of Congress was shot on location at enormous expense to the production. Indeed, the filmmakers had originally planned to shoot the film in the actual *Washington Post* newsroom where the events took place; however, they found that the staff working in the newsroom were unable to continue to work normally in the background of shots, even going as far as sneaking off to the bathroom to apply make-up before a shoot. This problem led to the production being moved to a constructed set in Los Angeles. In order to maintain the verisimilitude, the filmmakers had crates of props sent to them from the *Washington Post* newsroom, including old calendars, government directories and stickers from employee's desks. Old newspapers from the exact days that the film was set in were placed around the newsroom. Such measures ensured that the newsroom setting looks completely authentic in the film.

The language used within the newsroom setting is another example of verisimilitude in *All the President's Men*. Toplin (*History by Hollywood* 190) notes that the filmmakers, particularly screenwriter William Goldman and producer/actor Robert Redford, spent many hours observing the conversations of *Washington Post* employees. Redford was especially interested in the language used in the editor meetings, and much of the dialogue in those scenes derives directly from Redford's observations. The filmmakers went so far as to use the actual phone number of the White House switchboard in the film, rather than sticking to the standard convention of using false phone numbers in films.

Casting was also a means of maintaining a high degree of verisimilitude. Most of the cast members, particularly in minor roles, were chosen based on their physical similarity to the historical figures they portrayed. This extended even further in the case of Frank Willis, the security guard who first discovers the break-in at the Watergate building, who plays himself in the film.

While many of these measures would go predominately unnoticed by the viewing audience, it is obvious that the filmmakers greatly prioritised verisimilitude and historical accuracy. The reasons for this attention to detail are two-fold. First, the credibility of the film is greatly heightened by this adherence to verisimilitude. The audience is never distracted by noticing historical anomalies, often a problem in historical films; rather they are encouraged to be impressed by the standard of accuracy. Further, the filmmaker's dedication to historical accuracy limits the potential for criticism. Historical films are regularly attacked by critics, particularly historians, for failing to maintain historical accuracy. *All the President's Men* deflects this type of criticism by placing great importance upon the minor details of the film.

One of the key elements in the documentary form is the use of primary sources as supporting evidence (Nichols). This evidence can take the form of interviews, archival footage, audio recordings, still photographs or written material. While the fictionalisation and dramatisation of *All the President's Men* clearly delineate the film from the documentary genre, it is clear that the filmmakers have utilised primary sources to give the film documentary credibility. The film opens with a piece of archival news footage, depicting President Nixon arriving at congress by helicopter to address the nation. The footage is accompanied by a newsreader commentary, describing Nixon's arrival. It is a powerful choice of footage. While on the surface it is a depiction of Nixon at the height of his power, it is also strongly reminiscent of a far more recognisable piece of news footage, Nixon leaving the White House after resigning from office. The audience is immediately reminded that they are already aware of this story, that the film they are about to see is merely filling in the details of a true story with a well known conclusion.

By opening with archival footage, the film immediately begins to establish credibility because it presents the audience with primary sources. This technique is maintained throughout the film, albeit in a more subtle manner. Apart from the opening sequence, most of the archival footage seen in the film appears in the background, on television sets in the *Washington Post* newsroom. Such footage is rarely the focus of a sequence and is often reduced to audio only. This adds to the verisimilitude of the film, with actual news broadcasts from the time playing as the journalists investigate the case, but more importantly it adds to the film's credibility by constantly providing the audience with primary sources to support the dramatic action. Indeed, the use of primary sources in *All the President's Men* is somewhat more sophisticated than typical documentary form, as the source material is integrated seamlessly into the film without disrupting the narrative flow.

In fact, the use of primary sources provides an important element of the narrative structure. The development of the investigation is punctuated throughout the film by news broadcasts and shots of newspaper articles, indicating the progress that the investigation has made. This is crucial, as it provides documentary evidence that supports

every major development in the investigation while also reminding the audience of the consequences of the investigation, which the film otherwise rarely touches upon. As with the opening sequence's allusion to Nixon's demise, the audience's awareness of the scandal is more firmly rooted in the outcomes than the details. Thus the filmmakers use the documentary material to create the necessary link between the details of the investigation and well known historical consequences.

The other element of *All the President's Men* worthy of examination is the use of various cinematic techniques to heighten the meaning of the film. The lighting, camera angles, sound design and editing all contribute immensely to the film's portrayal of the Watergate scandal. The lighting scheme used throughout the film sets the tone for much of the action and has major implications for how the audience perceives the characters and action.

The lighting in the *Washington Post* newsroom, where Woodward and Bernstein conduct most of their work, is lit with bright uniform light. This is accentuated by the white colouring of the room and much of the furniture. Similarly, many of Woodward and Bernstein's interviews take place in bright, outdoor locations. This contrasts most dramatically with the 'deep throat' scenes, which take place in an underground parking garage, devoid of light, where the characters are obscured by shadow. The visual implication is clear. 'Deep throat', the government insider, is shrouded by the darkness of the Watergate scandal, while the two journalists work in the bright openness. The lighting also becomes more shadowy as the film progresses. The deeper Woodward and Bernstein dig into the scandal, the more sequences take place at night. This culminates in the finale of the film with Woodward running in the darkness, fearing he is being chased, followed by a night-time meeting between the journalists and their editor, Ben Bradlee. By this time they have become so involved in the scandal, they too are consumed by darkness. It is no longer safe to talk in the light.

Similarly, the enormity of Woodward and Bernstein's task is often conveyed to the audience through the choice of camera angles and camera movements. This occurs in the sequence in the Library of Congress, with the two journalists searching through thousands of library slips. The camera pulls back in a slow zoom out from above, leaving Woodward and Bernstein dwarfed by their imposing surroundings. Cinematographer Gordon Willis noted "that particular sequence was designed to show that these reporters were trying to find the proverbial 'needle in a haystack' (Pizzello 120). This is a motif used throughout the film. A later scene shows a wide shot of the *Washington Post* newsroom with Woodward typing far in the background. The camera slowly zooms in on Woodward as he types. The enormity of the journalists' task, and their isolation in an increasingly complex situation, is conveyed to the audience through these camera shots.

The sound design in the film is also noteworthy. The film opens with the sound of a typewriter: sharp, loud crashes that sound like gunshots. In fact, the sound was created by layering audio of gunshots and whip-lashes over the typewriter. This immediately introduces the idea that "the typewriter, by implication the press, is a weapon of war" (Cameron 187) in the battle against a corrupt government. This is evident again at the end of the film when the final indictments of the Watergate conspirators come through over the teletype accompanied by the sound of cannon fire, a twenty-one gun salute in the background.

The editing throughout the film is another means of the filmmakers utilising the film form to convey a message to the audience. The frequent telephone conversations conducted by Woodward and Bernstein provide a prime example. When either Woodward or Bernstein is on the phone the audience never sees the person on the other end. The camera never cuts away from the journalist. This maintains the anonymity of the conspirators in the Watergate scandal; they are merely faceless voice on the end of a phone line. This distance between the audience and the conspirators ensures that the audience is never able to sympathise with them, rather they must share the experience of the journalists.

*All the President's Men* has had a major impact on public understanding of the Watergate saga. The film's affect on the 1976 Presidential election, its development of the famous 'characters' of the saga and, most importantly, its creation of the accepted narrative of Watergate, all point to the substantial influence of the film. The filmmakers' ability to tell a story of such historical significance derives largely from their dedication to an adherence to verisimilitude. Historical accuracy, combined with the use of primary source, create a film that presents a high level of authenticity. Further, the strong empathy that the film creates with the protagonists, Woodward and Bernstein, also aids in manipulating the audience into believing the portrayal of Watergate presented in *All the President's Men*. Finally, the filmmakers utilise all the tools available in the cinematic form—lighting, editing and sound—to reinforce the messages that the film presents. In this way, *All the President's Men* offers a clear example of the means of constructing a believable cinematic representation of history.

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