

Untangling the Web of Watergate

The flood of Watergate books has begun. This season's wave of personal confessions and Presidential transcripts will surely be followed in the months and years ahead by the more reflective analyses of lawyers, political scientists and even, perhaps, theologians. Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward's account of their investigative reporting of the scandal has the ephemeral quality of all journalism. Yet it is guaranteed not only commercial success, but also a distinctive place in the Watergate bibliographies of the future. By tenacious tugging at the loose ends of the Watergate tangle, they helped unravel the whole sorry web.

They tell their story in the third person as a kind of journalistic novel, not unlike—if the allusion is not too grim—the form adopted in Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. Conversations are recreated in all candor; there is much attention to the texture of a situation, the mood of a moment or a person. The narrative moves skillfully from the shock of one discovery to another with the suspense of a good espionage novel. Unlike the latter, however, this story does not end; it can only stop. The unraveling of the conspiracy still goes on, now in the halls of Congress rather than on the pages of the *Washington Post*.

Bernstein and Woodward begin their story with the first reports of the break-in of the Democratic National Committee on June 17, 1972. Their book stops on page 332. It is March, 1974, and the "President's men" have been indicted by two grand juries.

Some have pleaded guilty. A few have already been imprisoned. And "Deep Throat," Woodward's mysterious but knowledgeable source, describes the portfolio of evidence turned over to the House Judiciary Committee as constituting a staggering case against the President.

True to their trade, the authors do not indulge in any sustained discussion of the ethical, or even political, implications of the conspiracy they still pursue. Their journalistic preoccupations, in fact, so dominate the story that the larger chronology often becomes dim. A second edition would be helped by some device that would relate the timetable of their investigation more clearly to relevant events, particularly in the summer and fall of 1972.

All the President's Men

by Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward
Simon and Schuster. 349p \$8.95

In an odd way, the persistence with which the two young, unknown reporters court or stalk potential sources of information reflects the same kind of ambition that drove those other eager careerists who were their antagonists—H. R. Haldeman's "Beaver Patrol," the Porters, the Magruder, the Strachans.

The lofty abstractions that are sometimes used to describe the adversary relation of press and government are here reduced to a more earthy reality. Accounts of tense editorial

meetings sound more like councils of war. The tension between ethics and deadlines seems less important than the fear of being set up for a false story and thereby discredited. Ethical concerns are not lacking, but the pressure of a competitive press is clearly a more realistic guarantee of fair coverage.

Mistakes were made, and the authors candidly admit that some innocent reputations suffered unfairly from misleading stories. They are not beyond a feeling of regret for such mistakes, nor are they insensitive to the human conflicts of many of those caught in the rush of events. But casualties are inevitable in war, and at times their drive for a story seems almost ruthless. Their discussions, for example, of penetrating grand jury secrecy concentrate on deniability in a way reminiscent of the Watergate conspirators themselves.

In March, 1973, James McCord wrote his famous letter to Judge John Sirica. Jeb Magruder and John Dean began talking with the prosecutors. The invisible conspiracy that Bernstein and Woodward had been poking at, like an iceberg beneath the surface, began to break up, and its pieces shifted crazily, dangerously, into new alignments. One phase of their investigation had ended. Instead of searching for scraps of information, now they had to measure the different versions of the story brought to them from different interests.

Perhaps the most ominous impression one brings away from this strange and gripping tale is the atmosphere of fear that haunted the secretaries, bookkeepers and other minor personnel of the Committee to Reelect the President in the summer of 1972, people uneasy in their consciences but afraid of antagonizing their powerful superiors. Fear of the employer, of course, is common enough, but in this case the employers controlled the American system of justice. Big Brother was watching and listening during FBI interviews, in the secrecy of the grand jury and even in the privacy of reporters' apartments. A citizen's freedom was a fragile thing in the Washington of 1972. The nightmare of 1984 has become more thinkable in 1974. ■

