

On all the president's men essay



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The Watergate crisis pressed on the United States the question of limiting presidential authority. Richard Nixon was perhaps a ruthless politician.

In his effort to ensure that he would win reelection in 1972, he authorized the creation of a Committee for the Reelection of the President (CREEP), and within its loose structure a unit to control unauthorized and unwanted disclosures of information, a group which dumped itself the "White House plumbers."

As a record of the Watergate crisis, "All the President's Men" is a failure, although it does contain some interesting tidbits. The authors, Washington Post reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, covered

Watergate, and kept many of the details before the American public, helping to add to the gradual accretion of pressure that eventually overwhelmed President Nixon, forcing his resignation, but they focus their account so much on their role as rather prominent members of the "fourth estate" that they exclude virtually all discussion of many of the more significant points in Watergate and in the constitutional struggle that underlay it.

Their account begins with Woodward assigned to cover a breaking at Democratic headquarters, and thinking initially that it is local Democratic headquarters rather than the national party headquarters. The case initially seemed like a third rate burglary, incongruous only in that the burglars were arrested wearing business suits.

But even then , details did not fit. One burglar, James McCord, had recently retired from the CIA, and had been a security consultant for CREEP. (19, 20-21)

Burglar Howard Hunt had phone numbers for the White House. He had an office there. (23-26) Very quickly, money began to appear: Howard Hunt paid a \$25, 000 retainer to a top Washington attorney, in cash. (34-35) Bernstein uncovered a record of some \$114, 000 was paid from Mexican banks to CREEP, with \$25, 000 going directly to a CREEP officer personally. (41-43)

As a Government Accounting Office audit showed, CREEP was a rat's nest, a slush fund, with thousands of dollars unaccounted for - eventually at least \$500, 000, with \$100, 00 specifically earmarked for a security operation of questionable legitimacy. (48-49)

There were reports of large scale money laundering through Mexico and shaking down of major Republican backers for huge contributions. (56-58) The finance chairman at CREEP, Maurice Stans, had a safe in his office which contained up to \$700, 000 in cash. (88)

Of necessity, Woodward and Bernstein worked with the staff a great deal, trying to piece together a picture of how CREEP worked. (60-73) The one source which seemed to have significant information at higher levels was Woodward's secret source, Deep Throat. (73-77)

The first significant story that the Post reported, in late September 1972, announced that John Mitchell, former attorney general and then chairman of

CREEP had controlled a slush fund, a secret illegal fund for financing campaign activities. (101-10)

Probably the biggest single find that Woodward and Bernstein made was the discovery of the activities of Donald Segretti, a naive young man who did what he called "ratfucking," activities that disrupted various Democratic party efforts. (116-34) These activities were illegal, and eventually led to Segretti's disbarment from the profession. They were scandalous.

The Post's disclosure of these activities helped show the malice and the petty meanness of Nixon's campaign efforts, which made winning by any means and at any cost standard practice. (134-65) Woodward and Bernstein later uncovered a fraternity member whom CREEP paid to infiltrate and spy on a group of Quakers who were maintaining a vigil at the White House. (289-93)

Given that these were the key items which the Post alone presented, it is not surprising that Woodward and Bernstein devote a major portion of their book to this material. However, in the great scheme of things, Donald Segretti and the fraternity boy were almost non-entities. If they were all that Richard Nixon had done, virtually no one would have know or cared.

On the eve of the election, the White House lashed out at the Post as the Democrat mouthpiece, predicting it would soon be repudiated. (166-74) At this very time, the Post mis-stepped badly. From interviews with Hugh Sloan, former CREEP treasurer, Woodward and Bernstein reported that H. R.

Haldeman, White House chief of staff, was implicated in the Watergate wrongdoing. (180-85) This led to a fire storm of criticism the White House showed the reports were be inaccurate. Bernstein and Woodward had stretched their information, and their paper came under a furious barrage of criticism. While Bernstein wrote a long piece picking apart the non-denials in the White House attacks, this did the paper little good. (205-07)

In this crisis, Woodward looked to Deep Throat. A meeting occurred, although it became much more dramatic in the movie based on the book. (219-21)