

Q&A with Alicia Shepard:

Why write about both Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein?

Bob and Carl are journalistic icons. They sold the contents of their desk at the Washington Post from 1972 to 1976 for \$5 million to the University of Texas in 2003. That tells you everything about their role in history. What other journalists could do that? Not Katie Couric. Not Mike Wallace. No one.

Not only did they play a key role in breaking the Watergate story, but they had a tremendous impact on journalism. After Watergate, we had a rise in investigative reporting, the advent of celebrity journalism and a marked difference in the tenor between the press and the White House. And let's not forget the influence Deep Throat played on journalism. After he first appeared, using anonymous sources became more popular than getting a source on the record.

After Watergate—possibly the most important event for journalism, politics, and the presidency in the last one hundred years—Woodward and Bernstein became living legends. They left an indelible high-water mark that every American journalist has had to confront since. But beyond their effect on us, what about our effect on them? How do you live the rest of your life knowing you've peaked by your thirtieth birthday? Not only have they become icons, but their divergent paths say a lot about the media on many different levels. Plus, many people don't realize this, but they're still very good friends.

How do you think Bob Woodward's latest book was affected by his legacy as the world's most famous journalist?

There is no other journalist in the world that could get the kind of front-page attention for a new book that Bob Woodward just got. *State of Denial* was excerpted in the *Post*, was the lead segment for "60 Minutes" and the cover of *Newsweek*. Woodward's book dominated the weekend talk shows. What's fascinating is that even if others have reported something, it takes on an elevated importance if it's in Woodward's book. Some of what is in *State of Denial* has already come out. Other may make similar revelations, but they pale next to a Woodwardian scoop. Mike Isikoff and David Corn have a best-selling book, *Hubris*, that came out three weeks before Woodward's. It revealed three of the 'scoops' listed in the *New York Times*' piece about the book but they were eclipsed by Woodward.

Has Woodward walked away from his Watergate legacy?

He bristles at being called the ultimate insider, but there's some truth to that. Remember, he was the one who popularized the criticism of insiders, saying, while still a metro reporter at the *Post*, "Big-name reporters were merely stenographers. Watergate has proved that that is not enough." But now he's become hugely rich by getting close to power than almost anyone else. Still, it depends on what you think of as the Watergate legacy. If you mean pulling back the curtain on power, that's all he's ever done. From *All the President's Men* (about investigative reporting) to *The Veil* (about the CIA) to his recent books on Bush, his only goal is to make a secret world less of a secret.

Do you buy into the criticism of Woodward?

It depends on the criticism. Many have taken him to task for his lack of sources, but no one has ever managed to catch him making something up. So that opinion has grown stale. More interesting is his tendency to miss the forest for the trees. By getting very close to a small cadre of people, he can pile on detail after detail that don't add up to anything. In his Belushi bio, he got all the facts right, but came under fire for not conveying at all the humor, talent, and sheer energy of John Belushi. When he was writing *The Veil*, it appears he was deliberately put off the scent of Iran-Contra. Imagine that. He spends years investigating the Reagan intelligence apparatus, and he totally missed Iran-Contra. The left criticized his first Bush book for being too pro-Bush, and the right criticized his second for being too anti-Bush. A fairer assessment is that both gave us the facts without a useful context. But he'd say he's just a reporter.

Why are they icons?

The public and even the press constantly gives Woodward and Bernstein solo credit for bringing down a president of the United States. They didn't! The courts, Congress and the FBI, among others, all played a role. If Nixon aide Alexander Butterfield hadn't revealed the existence of Nixon's secret taping system on Friday July 13, 1973, Nixon would never have resigned.

They became icons in the public's mind because they wrote a wildly successful book in 1974, *All the President's Men*, which was followed two years later by a movie of the same name starring Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman. Without that book or that movie, they would not have the stature they do today. By the way, this is the 30th year anniversary of the movie.

What surprised you in your research on their lives?

The Texas archives. Woodward and Bernstein's trajectory into fame is apparent in the 75 box stacks of interview notes, bank statements, galley proofs, and annotated screenplay drafts as well as seven boxes of newspaper and magazine clippings about the men, their books, and the movie that changed their lives. But what really blew me away were the fan letters. There are hundreds of them in there. It's unprecedented that lowly Metro reporters for the *Washington Post* would get so many fan letters. People thought of them as heroes. Some wrote romantic notes, others begged them for help with their own problems and scores more wanted their autographs. Letters arrived begging them to investigate fluoride, haunted houses, pollution, tax evasion, medical fraud in the armed forces, religious cults and even "Mrs. Kronick's husband's predicament" in Cuba.

Did Woodward and Bernstein cooperate with the book?

No, but they didn't try to quiet anyone. I spoke to them at the very start. Some of that I used in an oral history piece about them for a piece I did in *Washingtonian* magazine in 2003. I did, however, draw heavily on more than 175 interviews with many of their colleagues, as well as their Watergate archives and the archives of David Halberstam and movie director Alan J. Pakula. Interestingly, Pakula did many in-depth interviews with all the players, including Nora Ephron, before making the movie. Ben Bradlee said Pakula was like a therapist.

How do you think Woodward and Bernstein will respond to this book?

I think it will surprise them how much research I've done. Sometimes I think I might know more about their past than they remember! My goal as a journalist has always been to write accurately and fairly, and that's what I've done here. Let's face it, they are both controversial, so this book is no love letter.

Is it just Watergate?

No. While I do dissect their considerable accomplishments in covering the Watergate scandal, I also critique the years since. It's important to put every new Woodward book in context, and I look closely at a lot of the criticisms of Woodward, including his unusual sourcing, his relationship to the Post scoops, and the larger lessons of the Janet Cooke scandal. I also look at Bernstein's career, and whether he ever reached his potential, or if his career is the best he could do.

What is the Watergate legacy?

It sometimes seems like every reporter in America saw *All the President's Men* at a formative age and said, "I want to do that." The all important scoop became even more important, reporters became fame-seekers, and everyone began hoping their stories will have a real effect in the real world. Their outsider status—as metro reporters rather than national political reporters—was key to their independence, and most papers now have an investigative team separate from the national desk. We lost our absolute faith in our leaders, and started looking to the press to keep them in line.

In your opinion, has Carl Bernstein lived up to his potential? If not, why?

Carl signed a contract in 1999 to write a book on Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, due out in 2003. This past February, he told Larry King it was half-finished. In the same space of time, Woodward has written six books, including *State of Denial*. No matter how successful his books are, he still a lightning-rod for criticism. Over the years, there are more chinks in his armor.

The bottom line is that Carl has dined off of Watergate for the last three decades. He gives speeches, often criticizing the media, about 15 times a year for \$15,000 a pop. No matter what he does or accomplishes, it will always pale next to the prolific and prodigious work of Bob Woodward

Has the media kept up its watchdog ways?

Yes and no. It took politicians a long time to figure out how, but they've managed to undermine even our faith in independent investigative reporting. Nixon got plenty of mileage out of calling Woodward and Bernstein partisan, but now politicians can ignore the print media entirely. Blogs are the new outsiders, but they'll never have the resources, or the authority, to recreate what Woodward and Bernstein did.

How has their legacy affected your career as a journalist?

There's a whole generation of journalists, myself include, who went into the field because of Woodward & Bernstein. They made the profession noble. They made us

believe one could make a difference. I heard that over and over from scores of journalists I interviewed.