

This article was downloaded by: [69.140.170.68]

On: 05 December 2014, At: 14:20

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954

Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



American Journalism

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/uamj20>

Wallowing in Watergate: Historiography, Methodology, and Mythology in Journalism's Celebrated Moment

Mark Feldstein

Published online: 03 Dec 2014.

To cite this article: Mark Feldstein (2014) Wallowing in Watergate: Historiography, Methodology, and Mythology in Journalism's Celebrated Moment, *American Journalism*, 31:4, 550-570, DOI: [10.1080/08821127.2014.968946](https://doi.org/10.1080/08821127.2014.968946)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08821127.2014.968946>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

Essay

Wallowing in Watergate: Historiography, Methodology, and Mythology in Journalism's Celebrated Moment

By Mark Feldstein

“Let others wallow in Watergate.”¹

—President Richard Nixon, 1973

Forty years ago this autumn,² a month after resigning from the presidency in disgrace, Richard Nixon received a full and unconditional pardon for the crimes he committed while in office. But if the Watergate scandal seemed to end with the stroke of a presidential pen, the dispute over its legacy was only beginning. In particular, the role the news media played in ousting Nixon from office continues to be contested as new documentary evidence and new interpretations emerge about one of the most celebrated chapters in American journalism. This debate offers a window on larger issues about how history and mythology are constructed and revised over time, and how bias—political, professional, personal, intellectual, methodological—inherently shapes the judgments of those who render verdicts about the past.

Mark Feldstein is the Richard Eaton professor of broadcast journalism in the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland.

¹Carroll Kilpatrick, “Nixon Intends to Stay on Job,” *Washington Post*, July 21, 1973, A1.

²Journalistic news pegs structured around anniversary dates—as well as news conferences, interviews, political demonstrations, and speeches—are “pseudo-events,” in the words of historian Daniel Boorstin, “synthetic” or “counterfeit” occasions that ease journalistic routines to serve up “pre-cooked” stories that can “keep till needed.” But while “commemorative journalism” often “fails to provide” necessary historical context, scholar Jill Edy observed, nevertheless it “is one of the few times the media encourage us to look critically at our past,” and “even simple stories can offer a forum for debate about [its] meaning.” (Edy noted three ways that the news media shape collective memory: by using anniversaries or obituaries as news pegs to examine the past, by using historical analogies to compare contemporary events to previous ones, and by providing historical context to trace the origins of the present.) Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), 19; and Jill A. Edy, “Journalistic Use of Collective Memory,” *Journal of Communication* 49 (Spring 1999): 76.

By now, the scandal known as Watergate, and the constitutional crisis it provoked, has become a part of American folklore: In June of 1972, Washington, DC, police arrested five Nixon campaign operatives after catching them tapping the telephones of the rival Democratic Party in its Watergate building headquarters. The bugging turned out to be part of a much larger series of illegal abuses of power that preceded as well as followed this break-in, directed and unsuccessfully covered up by President Nixon himself. In the end, more than seventy people, including top members of his Cabinet and his closest White House advisors, were convicted of crimes; only the pardon by his presidential successor spared Nixon himself from becoming the first chief executive in history to face prison for his misconduct.³

What impact did America's news media have on all of this? Did *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein play a crucial part in bringing down Nixon? These are the fundamental questions about Watergate journalism that are still fiercely disputed today.

At bottom is a debate over media effects, about journalism's agenda-setting influence during Watergate—both on public opinion in general and official Washington elites in particular. Ultimately, however, exactly how crucial a role the press played during Watergate appears unknowable in any conclusive sense. Unlike a laboratory, where multiple variables can be controlled and altered, it is impossible to conduct experiments to see what would have happened if journalism as a whole, or the *Washington Post* in particular, had behaved differently.

But this hasn't stopped popular or academic analysis, which largely falls into one of three categories:

- The heroic narrative: the media's impact was pivotal and positive;
- The villainous narrative: the media's role was pivotal but negative;
- The minimalist narrative: for better or worse, the media's impact wasn't crucial in influencing events.

If the importance of Watergate journalism cannot be definitively established, then these different explanations would seem to say as much about their adherents as they do about what actually occurred. In Watergate, as in all case studies, different disciplines bring different tools to their research: journalists rely primarily on personal observations and interviews with participants; historians scrutinize declassified documents and White House audiotapes; political scientists use public opinion polls to quantify and measure. So the professional if not personal biases that underlie these various narratives may be as important as the analysis itself because they shed light on

³Stanley I. Kutler, *The Wars of Watergate: The Last Crisis of Richard Nixon* (New York: Norton, 1990), 9, 616, 620.

how methodological differences can lead to different understandings of the past.

I. The Heroic Narrative

The dominant heroic narrative of Watergate (among journalists and the public, if not scholars) is media-centric Great Man history: *Washington Post* reporters Woodward and Bernstein tenaciously uncovered the evidence implicating the Nixon White House in the Watergate burglary, piercing the administration's cover-up and thereby forcing reluctant law enforcement authorities to prosecute the most powerful officials in the government.

Unquestionably, Woodward and Bernstein's resourceful reporting stood out in the initial weeks after the Watergate break-in. They were the first journalists to link the burglars to the Nixon White House, to disclose that the break-in was funded by the president's re-election campaign, to report that it was part of a wider pattern of political sabotage, and to implicate Nixon's attorney general and White House chief of staff in the scandal.⁴ All of this happened at a time when Watergate was largely ignored by most media outlets and while Nixon's men were scrambling to thwart congressional and Justice Department investigations of the scandal.⁵ "In Watergate, it was unclear at first whether the FBI would pursue crimes beyond the break-in itself," Rutgers historian David Greenberg, a onetime researcher for Woodward, argued. "If the *Post* hadn't kept Watergate alive, it's not certain that the bureau, or the Senate, would have kept digging."⁶

⁴W. Joseph Campbell, *Getting It Wrong: Ten of the Greatest Misreported Stories in American Journalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 122–123. In the first six months after the Watergate arrests, the *Washington Post* published some two hundred stories about Watergate—many on the front page—more than twice that of the *New York Times*. Otherwise, media coverage of Watergate was "almost nonexistent." Before Nixon's landslide re-election in November 1972, fewer than fifteen of more than four hundred reporters in Washington worked exclusively on Watergate; and more than seventy percent of the nation's newspapers endorsed Nixon's re-election—while just five percent opposed it. Watergate coverage increased only slightly even when the burglars' trial began in January of 1973, and Nixon was barely questioned by reporters about the scandal until more than nine months after the break-in. Louis W. Leibovich, *Richard Nixon, Watergate, and the Press: A Historical Retrospective* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 68, Appendix C; and Kutler, *Wars of Watergate*, 226.

⁵The White House cover-up included destroying documents, intimidating witnesses, paying hush money to the Watergate burglars, and getting pliant officials at the top of the Justice Department to reveal evidence FBI agents were uncovering about Nixon's men; these and other attempts to obstruct the criminal probe ultimately failed, some more quickly than others. Kutler, *Wars of Watergate*; Bob Woodward, *The Secret Man: The Story of Watergate's Deep Throat* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 74, 83; Max Holland, *Leak: Why Mark Felt Became Deep Throat* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012), 98.

⁶David Greenberg, *Nixon's Shadow: The History of an Image* (New York: Norton, 2003), 162.

More than their actual news articles, however, it was their best-selling book, *All the President's Men*, that indelibly cast Woodward and Bernstein as journalistic heroes. They dramatically recreated scenes and dialogue, serving up a tense chronological tale that, as one author put it, offered “the appeal of a detective story, clue upon clue finally demonstrating a connection between the White House and the burglary’s cover-up.”⁷ Their memoir reached bookshelves at the height of the Nixonian saga, promoted by its publisher as “the most devastating political detective story of the century,” in which the “two young reporters . . . smashed the Watergate scandal wide open.”⁸ Two years later, Hollywood immortalized the reporters’ exploits in a blockbuster movie viewed by tens of millions. Warner Brothers advertised the film as “the story of the two young reporters who cracked the Watergate conspiracy” and “solved the greatest detective story in American history.”⁹

In both the book and movie versions, Woodstein (as the famous reporting duo became known) were the stars of their narrative, which recounted their exploits uncovering wrongdoing by the highest authorities in the land. This account was so compelling, sociologist Michael Schudson wrote, that it created its own mythology “that two young *Washington Post* reporters brought down the president of the United States. This is a myth of David and Goliath, of powerless individuals overturning an institution of overwhelming might. It is high noon in Washington, with two white-hatted young reporters at one end of the street and the black-hatted president at the other. . . . And the good guys win.”¹⁰

⁷Michael Schudson, *Watergate in American Memory: How We Remember, Forget, and Reconstruct the Past* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 20.

⁸Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, *All the President's Men* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974), book jacket.

⁹Feldstein, “Watergate Revisited,” *American Journalism Review*, August/September 2004, 62–63.

¹⁰Schudson, *Watergate in American Memory*, 104. To be sure, the narrative by Woodward and Bernstein did not purport to be a definitive history of the Watergate scandal but a contemporary memoir about their experiences covering the story. “To say that the press brought down Nixon, that’s horseshit,” Woodward later said. “The press always plays a role, whether by being passive or by being aggressive, but it’s a mistake to overemphasize” media coverage. But author David Halberstam reflected the larger journalistic mindset in his media-centric book, *The Powers That Be*. “Watergate was a will-o’-the-wisp,” he wrote, an “evanescent” story that could have vanished if not for Woodward and Bernstein: “If the story had broken on a weekday instead of on a weekend, perhaps the *Post* might have assigned a senior political reporter from the national staff, a reporter already preoccupied with other work, and the story might have died quickly. If the first marriages of both Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein had not ended leaving them both bachelors, they might have been pulled away by the normal obligations of home and might not have been willing to spend the endless hours that the story required.” Without Woodstein, in other words, Watergate might never have been exposed, Nixon never driven from office. David Halberstam, *The Powers That Be* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 606; Feldstein, “Watergate Revisited,” 63.

This oversimplified narrative—“the Hardy Boys go to the White House,” one critic dubbed it—nonetheless gained traction in the aftermath of Nixon’s resignation.¹¹ After all, reporters already seemed an inextricable part of Watergate, the messenger from whom the public learned about the scandal in the first place; so it was only natural for Americans to view the journalists who publicized the latest revelations as responsible for uncovering them to begin with. In addition, Watergate’s tawdry criminality—following the horrors of the Vietnam War and recent exposés of CIA and FBI abuses—increased public disillusionment with government; in an otherwise grim time, scruffy, idealistic outsiders from the press made appealing heroes.

The romantic Woodstein narrative soon hardened into conventional wisdom. Journalism schools celebrated the tale as an article of faith: Woodward and Bernstein “toppled a president,” a popular news reporting textbook declared; their work “led to President Nixon’s resignation,” another trumpeted; they “brought down the Nixon administration,” echoed a third.¹² The more the press was beset by embarrassing scandals of its own—a raft of inaccuracies, plagiarism, and fabrication—the more news outlets recycled Watergate’s media mythology as a kind of ethical shield.¹³ News organizations routinized the dogma in regular commemorations on anniversaries of the Watergate burglary and Nixon’s resignation.¹⁴ “Some journalists seem

¹¹Adrian Havill, *Deep Truth: The Lives of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein* (New York: Birch Lane, 1993), 88.

¹²Campbell, 116, 224–225. As recently as the summer of 2014, award-winning author Rick Perlstein recycled the folktale, writing that Woodward and Bernstein “cracked Watergate” and the press as a whole succeeded in “taking down a president.” So, too, the director of Harvard’s Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy, Alex S. Jones, stated in his most recent journalism book that “press coverage brought down a president.” Rick Perlstein, *The Invisible Bridge: The Fall of Nixon and the Rise of Reagan* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 462; and Alex S. Jones, *Losing the News: The Future of the News That Feeds Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 60.

¹³“Even for journalists who were not involved or who entered into news work after Nixon’s resignation, journalistic retellings of Watergate have been foundational to journalism’s self-identity,” media scholar Matt Carlson observed. “As journalism comes under fire in the present, the need to cultivate the past in a manner that supports journalistic authority takes on added importance.” Matt Carlson, “Embodying Deep Throat: Mark Felt and the Collective Memory of Watergate,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 27, no. 3 (2010): 237.

¹⁴At times, Watergate narcissism has verged on parody as bit players have sought reflected glory in the tale even decades afterward. For example, a zoning board’s 2014 vote to tear down the parking garage where Woodward met Deep Throat received national news coverage, and actor Robert Redford’s 2013 documentary, “All the President’s Men Revisited,” was a “self-celebration” that “gives almost as much credit to Mr. Redford for making a movie about Watergate as it does to the *Washington Post* for sticking with the story.” Doug Stanglin, “Garage of ‘Deep Throat’ Watergate Fame to Be Razed,” *USA Today*, June 16, 2014; Kris Maher, “Watergate Parking Garage to Be Torn Down,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 20, 2014; and Alessandra Stanley, “Robert Redford Narrates ‘All the President’s Men Revisited,’” *New York Times*, April 18, 2013.

incapable of seeing flaws in themselves or their heroes,” one critic lamented. “They suspend their professional skepticism” in “a kind of self-important higher-calling disease.”¹⁵

To be sure, the lionizing of Woodstein was challenged from the start by other newsmen who had also covered Watergate. Woodward and Bernstein were “inexperienced reporters” whose “contributions to the success of the Watergate probe” were no better than dozens of other journalists, veteran Washington correspondent Clark Mollenhoff wrote.¹⁶ This was an exaggeration, but other newsmen undeniably broke important stories about the scandal. *New York Times* reporter Seymour Hersh was the first to expose the administration’s conspiracy to cover up the Watergate break-in, including payments of hush money to buy the burglars’ silence; this “devastating” revelation worried the White House far more than any of the Woodstein articles, Nixon legal counsel John W. Dean recalled.¹⁷ Numerous other print journalists uncovered Nixonian corruption and abuse of power unrelated to the Watergate break-in: corporate bribery; tax fraud and audits of political enemies; illegal wiretaps on reporters and their sources; secret bombing of Cambodia; and plots to overthrow the president of Chile.¹⁸

Television, too, would claim a share of the credit for Nixon’s demise, especially after its live gavel-to-gavel coverage of the Senate’s Watergate hearings, which broadcast the arrogant evasions of Nixon’s men as they were grilled about their seedy White House conspiracies. The televised hearings ran 237 hours over 37 days and reached tens of millions of viewers; according to Nielsen ratings, “nearly 90 percent of all Americans” tuned in, averaging 30 hours for each home television set. “Those regular watchers of soap operas who had at first complained because their favorite programs were being crowded off soon became hooked,” journalist David Halberstam stated. “When it was all over . . . the White House in the truest sense had lost control.”¹⁹

Even journalistic rivals who resented the glorification of Woodstein embraced the media mythology of Watergate; they merely objected to Woodward and Bernstein getting all the credit. Instead of Great Man history (singular),

¹⁵Phil Bronstein, “The Newsroom,” *New York Times*, August 3, 2012.

¹⁶Clark R. Mollenhoff, *Investigative Reporting: From Courthouse to White House* (New York: Macmillan, 1981), 337.

¹⁷Feldstein, “Watergate Remembered,” 67. See also John W. Dean, *Lost Honor* (Los Angeles: Stratford, 1982), 272; and John W. Dean, *The Nixon Defense: What He Knew and When He Knew It* (New York: Viking, 2014), 208–209.

¹⁸Mark Feldstein, *Poisoning the Press: Richard Nixon, Jack Anderson, and the Rise of Washington’s Scandal Culture* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2010).

¹⁹Gladys Engel Lang and Kurt Lang, *The Battle for Public Opinion: The President, the Press, and the Polls during Watergate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 62; and Halberstam, 696–697.

they preferred a narrative of Great Men (plural). That the news media was instrumental, and acted heroically, was taken for granted.

II. The Villainous Narrative

While the heroic narrative of Watergate journalism has dominated our collective memory,²⁰ it has been challenged by an opposite, negative interpretation. Instead of the history of Great Men, some dissenters have served up a history of Terrible Men. In both explanations, Watergate news coverage was considered crucial; but these revisionists condemned the media instead of praising it.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, this alternate view began with pro-Nixon polemicists. In 1977, right-wing columnist Victor Lasky—who had been secretly on the payroll of Nixon’s presidential campaign—published a best-selling book blaming “a rampaging media” for the president’s “political assassination.” The press “sought to disembowel” Nixon and blow Watergate “into hysterical proportions,” Lasky asserted, a conspiracy that successfully culminated in “regicide.”²¹ Six years later, conservative author Paul Johnson endorsed a similarly malevolent media-centric narrative. The “*Washington Post* . . . decided to make the Watergate break-in a major moral issue, a lead followed by the rest of the East Coast media,” Johnson wrote. This “Watergate witch-hunt” was “run by liberals in the media” and became “the first media Putsch in history, as ruthless and anti-democratic as any military coup.”²²

Soon after, following revelations of secret CIA plots to assassinate foreign leaders and spy on innocent Americans, other revisionists recycled an old canard that the intelligence agency (in collusion with investigative reporters) was behind Watergate. In fact, this was a ruse Nixon himself had unsuccessfully advanced several years earlier to try to cover up the scandal. But it was now embraced by conspiracy theorists whose motives were untainted by pro-Nixon politics. In 1984, the book *Secret Agenda* suggested that during Watergate, “Woodward and the *Post*” were “mere tools in a power struggle” between the CIA and Nixon.²³ In 1991, another book made the

²⁰Unlike history—the reality of what actually happened in the past—collective memory is how society chooses to remember those events: the “meaning that a community makes of its past,” as one scholar put it. Edy, 71.

²¹Victor Lasky, *It Didn’t Start with Watergate* (New York: Dial Press, 1977), 1–3, 247–253; and Greenberg, 218–221.

²²Paul Johnson, *Modern Times: A History of the World from the 1920s to the Year 2000* (London: Phoenix Giant, 1999), 649–653.

²³Jim Hougan, *Secret Agenda: Watergate, Deep Throat, and the CIA* (New York: Random House, 1984), xviii, 281. This book received wide publicity—its author was interviewed on network TV broadcasts—but leading reviewers criticized its “circumstantial. . . uneven quality of evidence” and “inference and innuendo. . . tottering on a tower of unproven assumptions.” J. Anthony Lukas, “A New Explanation of Watergate,” *New York Times Book Review*, November

best-seller list by claiming that Nixon was ousted in a “secret coup” because he was insufficiently hawkish on foreign policy—and that Woodward was a covert collaborator in the scheme.²⁴ Despite widespread scorn by leading Watergate experts, several subsequent books embraced all or part of these conspiracy theories.²⁵ These revisionists “built their cases on faulty logic and tenuous evidence,” historian Greenberg wrote, “but argued with enough passion and relentlessness to win themselves a hearing.”²⁶

Why? Perhaps because “big events” generally “call for big causes . . . to do justice to [their] emotional importance,” in the words of three researchers who study conspiracy theories.²⁷ They are “a means of making sense of turbulent social or political phenomena,” two other scholars wrote; even illogical theories can supply “a convenient alternative to living with uncertainty,” especially when “mainstream explanations” seem ambiguous or incomplete.²⁸

Perhaps no one fueled these various Watergate conspiracies more than the mysterious “Deep Throat,” the pseudonymous government informant (nicknamed for a notorious 1972 porn flick) who leaked to Woodward on “deep background.” His clandestine middle-of-the-night meetings in a deserted parking garage, chain-smoking cigarettes in the shadows of the capital, added gripping intrigue and cinematic panache to both the film and print versions of *All the President's Men*. Deep Throat became an integral part of both the heroic and anti-heroic narratives of Watergate journalism, a Rorschach test of what the scandal meant.

11, 1984, 7, 9; and Anthony Marro, “Deep Throat, Phone Home,” *Washington Post Book World*, November 25, 1984, 5, 7.

²⁴Len Colodny and Robert Gettlin, *Silent Coup: The Removal of a President* (New York: St. Martin's, 1991). This book was attacked both by reviewers (“wild charges and vilifications,” “fantasies”) and Watergate participants (“a scandalous fabrication,” “untrue and pathetic,” “a fraud,” “absolute garbage,” “lunatic”). The book's publisher settled out of court after a \$150 million libel lawsuit was filed against it. Howard Kurtz, “Watergate Book Opens to Tough Audience,” *Washington Post*, May 21, 1991, C1, 3; William L. O'Neill, “Break-Ins, Cover-Ups, and the Watergate Conspiracy,” *Washington Post*, June 30, 1991; Stephen E. Ambrose, “What He Didn't Know and When He Didn't Know It,” *New York Times Book Review*, June 23, 1991, 7–8; and George Lardner Jr., “Watergate Libel Suit Settled,” *Washington Post*, July 23, 1997, C1, 8.

²⁵See, for example, Joan Hoff, *Nixon Reconsidered* (New York: Basic, 1994); Jonathan Aitken, *Nixon: A Life* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 1996); Conrad Black, *Richard M. Nixon: A Life in Full* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007); and Roger Stone and Mike Colapietro, *Nixon's Secrets: The Rise, Fall, and Untold Truth about the President, Watergate, and the Pardon* (New York: Skyhorse, 2014).

²⁶Greenberg, 217.

²⁷Bradley Franks, Adrian Bangerter, and Martin W. Bauer, “Conspiracy Theories as Quasi-Religious Mentality: An Integrated Account from Cognitive Science, Social Representations Theory, and Frame Theory,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 4, no. 1 (July 2013): 2.

²⁸Viren Swami and Rebecca Coles, “The Truth Is Out There,” *Psychologist* 23, no. 7 (2010): 561.

So alluring was the mystery of Deep Throat's identity that solving it became a minor Washington obsession. Entire books, and hundreds of articles, offered up theories about who the enigmatic informant could be,²⁹ including speculation that he was a composite character or outright fabrication. By one account, Woodstein's researcher on *All the President's Men* "emerged from the experience doubting Deep Throat's existence," and their editor and agent both believed that "there wasn't a single source for Deep Throat." Even *Washington Post* executive Benjamin Bradlee later wondered if Woodward had embellished some dramatic details: "There's a residual fear in my soul that that isn't quite straight." At the start of their book project, according to the reporters' literary agent, the writers had "faced a dilemma—how do you make the narrative flow of [their] story exciting? How do you get around the problem of countless talking heads exchanging information? The solution, of course, is Deep Throat." Woodstein's publisher was quoted as urging them to "build up the Deep Throat character."³⁰

How important was Deep Throat? "Because of his position" in an "extremely sensitive" part of the executive branch, Woodward wrote, Deep Throat's "words and guidance had immense, at time even staggering, authority"—despite the fact that he refused to be quoted even anonymously and cautiously preferred only to confirm or contradict information that Woodward already knew.³¹ But the *Washington Post* editor who directly supervised Woodstein, Barry Sussman, called Deep Throat a "bit player" who "barely figured" in the newspaper's coverage. "As a mole, he was pretty feeble," Sussman remembered; his "role as a key Watergate source for the *Post* is a myth, created by a movie and sustained by hype."³² And although Woodward

²⁹Historian Stanley Kutler argued that the "endless, pointless game of trying to identify Deep Throat" was really just "a convenient means of journalistic self-congratulation, a way the media reminds us of its place at the center of the Watergate constellation." Kutler, "Watergate Misremembered," *Slate*, June 18, 2002.

³⁰Leonard Garment, *In Search of Deep Throat: The Greatest Political Mystery of Our Time* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 13; Havill, 86–88, 127; David Obst, *Too Good to Be Forgotten* (New York: Wiley, 1998), 246; and Jeff Himmelman, "The Red Flag in the Flowerpot," *New York*, April 29, 2012, <http://nymag.com/news/features/ben-bradlee-2012-5/>. Initially, Woodward and Bernstein didn't intend to write a memoir about themselves or Deep Throat; they originally proposed a more conventional narrative about the Nixon White House and Watergate. But the scandal began unraveling so quickly they feared that by the time their book was published, it would just be a rehash of old headlines. Hollywood's Robert Redford, who purchased the movie rights to their work, suggested they focus instead on themselves—"a howdunit," a wag called it, rather than "a whodunit, because that was already well known." Woodward, *Secret Man*, 108–109; Campbell, 119; and Alicia C. Shepard, *Woodward and Bernstein: Life in the Shadow of Watergate* (New York: Wiley, 2007), 59, 65–67, 74–76, 115.

³¹Woodward, *Secret Man*, 104, 66; and Shepard, 263.

³²"I can't recall any story we got because of" Deep Throat, Sussman said. "True, he offered encouragement that Watergate was important. . . . That was nice, but we knew it on our own." Sussman, who had a falling out with Woodward and Bernstein, believed they were hoisted on their own petard by exaggerating the role of Deep Throat, leading many people to

believed that his secret source “would never deal with him falsely” and “had never told [him] anything that was incorrect,” in fact much of what Deep Throat told the reporter turned out to be erroneous; “close to 60 percent of the information” that he leaked to Woodward was “just dead wrong” or “absurd,” former Nixon counsel Dean calculated. The enigmatic source depicted in *All the President’s Men* “obviously is great theater,” Dean said, but “I don’t think Deep Throat mattered at all” in reality.³³

If Deep Throat didn’t really matter, then did Woodstein or the rest of the news media? For many, the answer hinged on who the source was and why he leaked, a Rosetta Stone of Watergate.³⁴

In their book, Woodstein portrayed Deep Throat as an honest whistleblower who abhorred the “switchblade mentality” of the Nixon White House, especially how Nixon’s men would “fight dirty . . . regardless of what effect the slashing might have on the government and the nation.” Their source was willing to risk his job because he wanted “to protect the office” of the presidency and alter “its conduct before all was lost.”³⁵ The reporters’ heroic narrative was reinforced by their source’s.

In 2005, the mystery about Deep Throat’s identity came to an end when his family decided to go public with the news.³⁶ Woodward and Bernstein then reluctantly confirmed that W. Mark Felt, a top FBI official during Watergate—still alive at age 91 but incapacitated by strokes and dementia—

believe that “Woodward did little more than show up with a bread basket that Deep Throat filled with goodies.” This erroneously detracted from Woodstein’s genuine enterprise and initiative, Sussman realized, because the “greater the importance of Deep Throat, the less the achievement of the two reporters.” Barry Sussman, “Why Deep Throat Was an Unimportant Source,” *Nieman Watch Dog*, July 29, 2005; and Barry Sussman, “Watergate 25 Years Later,” *Watergate.info*, June 17, 1997.

³³Bernstein and Woodward, 271, 72. Archival records released over the years demonstrate that Deep Throat provided Woodward false information, either by accident or design. According to author Max Holland, there were also “marked differences” between *All the President’s Men* and the reporters’ contemporaneous typed notes, which they sold to the University of Texas archives for \$5 million in 2003. Holland discovered that many quotations in the book were substantially altered or nowhere to be found in the reporters’ files and that Woodstein articles misleadingly characterized a key FBI executive as a White House official or a “knowledgeable Republican source.” Another author who perused newly disclosed files found similarly misleading source attributions and out of context quotations in *All the President’s Men*. Dean, *Nixon Defense*, 165–168; Shepard, 107; Woodward, *Secret Man*, 76; Obst, 247; Holland, 143, 86, 94–95, 116, 143, 158, 232–233, 249; and Himmelman, “The Red Flag in the Flowerpot.”

³⁴For example, see Hougan, 280–281, and Ron Rosenbaum, “Ah, Watergate!,” *New Republic*, June 23, 1982, 15–23.

³⁵Bernstein and Woodward, 130, 243.

³⁶Government insiders figured it out much earlier—Nixon and his advisors in 1972, top Justice Department officials by 1974; they believed that Felt’s motive was ambition and revenge, not idealism. Jack Limpert, “If It Isn’t Tricia, It Must Be . . .,” *Washingtonian*, June 1974; Jack Limpert, “Deeper into Deep Throat,” *Washingtonian*, July 31, 1974; and Edward Jay Epstein, “Did the Press Uncover Watergate?,” *Commentary*, July 1974, 21–24.

was the elusive source.³⁷ The revelation made front-page news across the country.³⁸ The reaction predictably aligned along professional and ideological lines. Felt was a “snake,” Nixon’s onetime speechwriter Patrick Buchanan declared—“disloyal,” the conservative *New York Post* editorialized. Woodward and Bernstein went on television to extol Felt as “a man of immense courage” who served the country because he “told the truth.”³⁹ Felt “thought the Nixon team were Nazis” trying to undermine the “integrity and independence” of the FBI and “manipulate” it “for political reasons,” Woodward added; he leaked to “build public and political pressure to make Nixon and his people answerable.”⁴⁰

Media outlets across the country—suffering from journalism’s economic implosion, under assault for regurgitating disinformation planted by unnamed sources during the Iraq war—rushed to embrace the Deep Throat hagiography. Editorials variously praised Felt as “a patriot,” a whistleblower who served “the greater good of his country,” a man who was among “the best of American heroes.” Reporters “seeking to reinvigorate their role took hold of the Felt revelation” to “reassert Watergate as a touchstone upholding the cultural authority of journalism,” one scholar wrote.⁴¹

But the reality about Deep Throat was more nuanced, and far less heroic. Felt was a devoted protégé of the authoritarian J. Edgar Hoover, whose open contempt for civil liberties Felt unstintingly supported. In fact, Felt personally authorized illegal wiretaps, burglaries, and mail intercepts of political radicals and remained “proud” of doing so even after being convicted in court of

³⁷Woodward, *Secret Man*, 221–232. A year later, when Felt’s senility had worsened further at age 92, a ghostwritten book published under his name attempted to capitalize on his newfound fame. It included a statement that “there is no doubt that much of the White House involvement in the break-in and the subsequent cover-up would never had been brought to light without the help of the press.” Proponents of the heroic journalistic narrative have cited the remark as confirmation of their beliefs. But Felt offered a different opinion when Watergate was still fresh in his mind more than a quarter-century earlier: that the White House cover-up was doomed to failure, regardless of news coverage, because “No one could have stopped the driving force of the investigation without an explosion in the Bureau—not even J. Edgar Hoover.” This statement, too, should be treated with some caution because Felt made many demonstrably false statements at that time and later. Felt was “a truly cunning operator,” said Nixon counsel John W. Dean, who worked with Felt, “undoubtedly one of the most Machiavellian characters in government.” Jon Marshall, *Watergate’s Legacy and the Press: The Investigative Impulse* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 105–107; W. Mark Felt and John O’Connor, *A G-Man’s Life* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006), 213; W. Mark Felt and Ralph de Toledano, *The FBI Pyramid: From the Inside* (New York: Putnam, 1979), 258, 12, 213; and Dean, *Nixon Defense*, 226.

³⁸Woodward, *Secret Man*, 221–232.

³⁹Carlson, 244.

⁴⁰Bob Woodward, “How Mark Felt Became Deep Throat,” *Washington Post*, June 20, 2005.

⁴¹Carlson, 242–244, 239, 249.

violating their constitutional rights.⁴² The notion that he blew the whistle during Watergate because of moral resistance to White House spying was self-evidently absurd. Felt “had far more in common with Richard Nixon than with his liberal enemies,” Yale historian Beverly Gage wrote, and he “applauded Nixon’s attacks on college radicals, civil rights demonstrators, and leftists of all stripes.”⁴³

So what led Felt to leak? Ambition and revenge are the most credible explanations. Hoover died unexpectedly barely six weeks before the Watergate break-in. As his de facto second-in-command, Felt wanted—even expected—to be picked as Hoover’s successor.⁴⁴ Instead, Nixon chose an obscure and unimpressive FBI outsider, L. Patrick Gray, a longtime Nixon stalwart whom the White House could count on to be pliant.⁴⁵ Felt may simply have wanted vengeance against the president who had spurned him, although it is hard to imagine that even the shrewd FBI veteran could have foreseen Watergate’s shocking denouement; historical inevitability is a fallacy of hindsight to which contemporaries are blind.⁴⁶

More likely, Felt was only trying to undermine his new boss, whom he still hoped to replace. According to author Max Holland, who dug into previously unexamined oral history interviews with FBI officials, Felt “decided to treat the break-in as an unusually good opportunity to school the president in an important fact: that only an insider could be entrusted with the delicate task of running the Bureau.” Felt would “prove to the White House, through anonymous leaks to the media, that Gray was dangerously incompetent and incapable of running the Bureau”—until Nixon caught on and made the decision to replace his man with Felt. (Meanwhile, Felt pointedly blamed his FBI rivals for his own leaks.) And it almost worked: White House tapes show that Nixon was infuriated by the leaks and blamed Gray for not stopping them. But the president also discovered that Felt himself was planting many

⁴²Felt was also an apologist for Hoover’s bigoted policies, including his refusal to hire black and female FBI agents. Women posed a “risk” on the job because they were not “as strong as men,” Felt wrote, so it was a “waste” even to train them because “most women Agents would marry” and then “leave the FBI to devote themselves to child raising.” Felt even gave a pass to Hoover’s spying on Martin Luther King and publicly spread word that the civil rights leader took part in “drunken sexual orgies, including acts of perversion often involving several persons.” Felt, *Pyramid*, 121–126, 237, 330; and Woodward, *Secret Man*, 43.

⁴³Beverly Gage, “Deep Throat, Watergate, and the Bureaucratic Politics of the FBI,” *Journal of Policy History* 24, no. 2 (2012): 158.

⁴⁴Felt, *Pyramid*, 178, 208, 226, 294; and Sanford J. Ungar, *FBI* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), 279, 307, 496, 514, 431, 556–557.

⁴⁵Ungar, 497, 500–501, 519, 527.

⁴⁶Virtually all of Felt’s leaks took place in the first four months of the 26-month scandal. “Too often, speculations about Deep Throat’s motive have been influenced by Watergate’s seemingly inexorable endgame,” author Max Holland observed. “But the scandal did not start out as a mortal threat to Nixon’s presidency, and history should not be written as if it did.” Holland, 11.

of these stories in the press; his strategy backfired, and he was pushed out of the FBI.⁴⁷

Surely Woodward must have suspected early on that idealism wasn't the most likely reason that Felt was feeding him information. After all, Hoover's deputy had made no secret of his ambition to succeed his boss. A *Washington Post* journalist who was friendly with both Woodward and Felt wrote that he unabashedly "would tell reporters, 'Remember, I'm a candidate to become director of the FBI,' as if to say, 'You be good to me now, and I'll be good to you later.'"⁴⁸ Woodward began cultivating Felt years before Watergate, and he recognized that Felt was "crushed" when he didn't get Hoover's job. Felt "never really voiced pure, raw outrage" about Watergate, Woodward eventually acknowledged; the only time he reported hearing "a certain joy in Felt's voice" was when it briefly appeared that Gray would be forced out and Felt would replace him.⁴⁹ Yet Woodward depicted his source primarily as "a truth teller" whose "great decision" was "his refusal to be silenced."⁵⁰

⁴⁷Ibid., 26, 9, 108. According to Holland, unlike other Hoover men who also wanted to be director but gave up and resigned from the FBI when Gray got the top spot, Felt decided to "feign loyalty while working to undermine Gray" from the inside. Felt attacked Gray behind his back to newsmen and to FBI colleagues, even blaming Gray for Felt's own leaks. At the same time, Felt flattered Gray to his face—addressing him as "Boss" and obsequiously sending a thank-you note for an autographed photo: "I am rearranging the pictures in my office so that yours will occupy the most prominent spot." Meanwhile, Felt privately encouraged Gray to pursue the Watergate probe aggressively. "Felt was playing a tricky double game," Holland maintained, urging "Gray to keep the investigation moving and not let it be derailed" by the White House; it "cost Felt nothing, but was bound to hurt Gray" with Nixon. At the same time, "Felt was simultaneously communicating to the White House that everything would be different if *he* were the director—that he could accomplish what Gray was either unwilling or incapable of doing": stopping the leaks that Felt was helping to spread. No wonder FBI co-workers nicknamed the silver-haired Felt "the white rat." Still, Felt was not alone; he had several "active collaborators" in the FBI who also leaked to trusted reporters "to oust Gray and have Felt installed in his place," Holland found. "If Felt moved up, they would, too." Holland, 11, 9, 64, 54, 21, 41, 113–114, 123, 215, 97.

⁴⁸Ungar, 556–557; and Woodward, *Secret Man*, 72–73.

⁴⁹Felt met Woodward by happenstance one night in 1969 or 1970, when he was a Navy lieutenant dispatched to the White House to deliver a package. "I was almost drooling" to meet "someone at the center of the secret world I was only glimpsing in [the] Navy;" Woodward remembered, and was "way too anxious and curious. . . deferential, though I must have seemed needy. . . my patter verged on the adolescent." Worried about his future—upbraiding himself for his "gutless" naval service, fearful he was headed for an equally "gutless" life as a lawyer—Woodward turned his encounter with Felt "into a career counseling session." Felt offered boilerplate advice that Woodward should follow his heart, but the future reporter regarded it as a "revelation. I was thankful for the advice" and decades later still cherished it as "a kind of 'Rosebud,' the elusive X-factor in someone's life that explains everything." More important, "I had set the hook." Woodward, *Secret Man*, 20–26.

⁵⁰Woodward allowed that Felt had multiple motives that "were complicated and not fully explainable," that he was "torn and uncertain" about leaking and yet "liked the game" of it. Early on, the reporter speculated that Felt leaked because he wanted "to get caught so he would be free to speak publicly" or had "a love-hate dialectic about his government service." Later,

Why wasn't Woodward more forthcoming about Felt's baser motives?⁵¹ It would have been impossible, of course, for Woodward to write about his source's contempt for Gray, or his desire to replace him as FBI director, without blowing Deep Throat's cover. Nevertheless, it was unnecessary, if not misleading, to portray Felt as a high-minded whistleblower—although it made for a simpler and more uplifting Hollywood morality tale.⁵² Guilt may have been another factor: Woodward later admitted that he felt “shame” for having “used” Felt, a man he viewed as a father figure but who had angrily “exploded” and cut off all contact after Woodward floated the idea of outing Felt—while Nixon was still president.⁵³ Perhaps painting Felt in heroic terms was the reporter's attempt to compensate for a guilty conscience. Still, Woodward could have more explicitly owned up to Felt's self-interested designs once his identity was made public in 2005. But even then, Woodward largely framed Felt's “courageous” actions as an attempt to “protect” the FBI from White House control: “The crimes and abuses were background music” as “Watergate became Felt's instrument to reassert the Bureau's independence and thus its supremacy.”⁵⁴ Watergate's heroic narrative had

Woodward acknowledged that Felt viewed Gray as a “political hack” and regarded Woodward as his “agent.” Woodward, *Secret Man*, 46; and Holland, 191–192.

⁵¹In the midst of the fast-breaking Watergate scandal, Woodward asserted, there simply “was no time to ask our sources, ‘Why are you talking? Do you have an ax to grind?’” Perhaps Woodward didn't explicitly ask Felt such pointed questions because the answer was obvious; after all, why risk alienating a high-level insider on an important and highly competitive story by questioning, let alone impugning, his objectives? Naiveté, however, seems an unlikely explanation: “Even rookie reporters,” media critic Jack Shafer noted skeptically, “get suspicious of sources' motives.” Woodward, *Secret Man*, 104; and Jack Shafer, “What Made Deep Throat Leak?,” Reuters, February 21, 2012.

⁵²The “real whistleblowers,” Holland wrote, were Nixon campaign staff members who “took genuine risks, and gained nothing but their self-respect, by telling FBI agents or federal prosecutors the truth.” Holland, 193.

⁵³Woodward acknowledged that he had promised Felt “there would be no identification of him, his agency, or even a suggestion in print that such a source existed.” But Felt believed Woodward betrayed this “inviolable” agreement by prominently injecting him into *All the President's Men* anyway, under the pornographic nickname of Deep Throat. Woodward phoned to get Felt's reaction to the book after it was published. “When he heard my voice, he hung up,” Woodward said. “For days I was haunted,” afraid “that he might take his own life. . . I can still hear the bang of his telephone and the sudden dial tone.” For the next quarter-century, Woodward gave up on trying to repair the breach: “I was basically gutless. I did nothing.” But in 2000, the reporter tried again and called his old source. Felt, then 86 years old, seemed friendly. “I was relieved, terribly relieved,” Woodward remembered. A month later, Felt agreed to have lunch. Woodward “was exhilarated. It was as if some pall was beginning to lift.” But genuine absolution eluded him. It turned out that Felt's welcome was the product of senility not forgiveness; the FBI source didn't really remember Woodward or Nixon. Nevertheless, Woodward decided that Felt had taught the reporter a lesson about “gratitude. He not only had helped me on Watergate. He had showed me the way to develop relationships of trust.” Woodward, *Secret Man*, 218, 110–111, 115–116, 126, 165, 173, 183.

⁵⁴Woodward, *Secret Man*, 104, 214.

become so entrenched, so attached to reporter and source alike, that the mythology had become its own reality.⁵⁵

Of course, journalists commonly ascribe more noble motives to their sources, and to themselves, than is warranted. Informants leak to reporters for a variety of (sometimes overlapping) motives, including revenge, egotism, self-protection, political ideology, personal or bureaucratic ambition—even, sometimes, altruism.⁵⁶ Traditionally, journalists require only that information be verified, not that it be supplied by angels. Still, it is a time-honored tradition to defend the virtue of (your own) sources when they invariably come under attack from those they have implicated in wrongdoing—as Daniel Ellsberg, Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden, and many other, less famous news informants, have learned. Championing sources as principled whistleblowers is a way reporters attract more of them; calling them out as self-serving snitches would quickly dry up future leaks.⁵⁷

⁵⁵Besides, for Woodward, to tarnish a senile old man's image—as well as his own—would have appeared cruel as well as degrading; and to belatedly correct the record in all of its embarrassing complexity invited humiliating if overstated comparisons to Nixon's own Watergate stonewalling. "Don't give fodder to the fuckers" who already hated him, Woodward reportedly lectured a former underling in a vain attempt to prevent him from publicizing evidence he found about embellishments in *All the President's Men*. Longtime mentor Benjamin Bradlee thought this reaction "off the charts"; even if Woodward added a few "bells and whistles" to "neaten things up a little—we all do that! . . . Woodward got his bowels in an uproar" because he wrong saw even minor criticism as "a critical and fatal attack on his integrity." Himmelman, "The Red Flag in the Flowerpot."

⁵⁶Stephen Hess, *The Government/Press Connection: Press Officers and Their Offices* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1984), 77–78.

⁵⁷This is true for all journalists but as the American reporter best known for his use of unnamed sources, Woodward has been repeatedly singled out for criticism over the years. "Those who talk to [him] can be confident. . . that he will treat even the most patently self-serving account as if untainted," thus reassuring future informants that their "testimony will not only be respected but burnished into the inside story," author Joan Didion complained. Woodward's omniscient narrative voice and opaque attribution were so "larded with flattering portrayals of cooperative sources" that another journalist satirized how Hitler's last days would have been depicted: "Goering and Himmler had heard rumors that the Fuhrer was anti-Semitic. It was all hearsay, innuendo, but still, the two men were troubled. They had reached an inescapable conclusion: they must go to Berchtesgaden, confront the Fuhrer with these allegations, and ask him to put all doubts to rest. . . 'The Jews, mein Fuhrer, what's happened to all the Jews?' Goering asked. 'There used to be so many of them.' . . . Hitler exploded. 'I don't give a shit how you do it, just get rid of them. That's the plan.' The two men greeted these remarks with a disappointed silence. There was not much room for maneuvering here. It could be a problem. They kept their concerns to themselves, however. They did not wish to add to the Fuhrer's burdens. . . . The three men shook hands and Himmler and Goering simultaneously realized how little they really knew the Fuhrer, even after all these years." Joan Didion, "The Deferential Spirit," *New York Review of Books*, September 19, 1996; and Arthur Levine, "The Final Days of the Third Reich as Told to Woodward and Bernstein," *Washington Monthly*, September 1976, 48–52.

Regardless, the debate about Deep Throat's motives presumes that Felt, like Woodstein, actually mattered. It is still a variant of Great/Terrible Man history, one that invests excessive import in the individual rather than in larger institutional forces. In fact, however, Felt was one of many career professionals who aggressively pushed the Watergate investigation both inside the FBI and outside to congressional allies and the press; in the wake of Hoover's death, his loyalists engaged in a subterranean revolt against Nixon over who would control the powerful law enforcement agency.⁵⁸ In this sense, Woodward and Felt as individuals were marginal to the final outcome, which was, in many ways, a routine Washington dispute over bureaucratic turf—albeit one with unforeseeably extreme results. “Watergate might best be viewed, especially in its earliest phases, as a struggle between the president and a bureaucracy that he could not control,” historian Gage argued.⁵⁹ This “institutional struggle between political allies contained within the executive branch” was not about whether “to preserve the American constitution or to limit the imperial presidency, as the standard Watergate myths would suggest, but to protect the legacy of J. Edgar Hoover.”⁶⁰

III. The Minimalist Narrative

The heroic and anti-heroic narratives of journalism's role during Watergate—Great Men and Terrible Men history—are, of course, exagger-

⁵⁸Holland, 34, 410–442, 89; and Ungar, 509, 520–523, 531, 533–534, 556. “Felt and his cronies were passing out information to favorite reporters at will,” former Nixon counsel John W. Dean wrote, “and as it turns out, Bob Woodward of the *Washington Post* was way down Felt's list.” An important backdrop to Watergate, historian Stanley Kutler observed, was the post-Hoover “War of FBI Succession,” during which “the Hooverites did what all disgruntled bureaucrats do: They leaked.” Dean, *Nixon Defense*, 686; Kutler, *Wars of Watergate*, 120; and Kutler, “Watergate Misremembered.”

⁵⁹Or, as journalist Jack Shafer put it: “The Hoover FBI wanted to be the only semi-fascistic national police force on the scene and would repel all trespassers.” Some reporters began advancing this institutional explanation for the FBI's Watergate leaks as early as 1973; “in our national preoccupation with personality and celebrity in the nation's capital,” one wrote, “we have concentrated too much on Deep Throat as an individual and not enough on the underlying bureaucratic forces.” Jack Shafer, “Why Did Deep Throat Leak?,” *Slate*, June 2, 2005; John Crewdson, “FBI Warns Staff on Leaking Data,” *New York Times*, August 26, 1973, A1; and James Mann, “Deep Throat: An Institutional Analysis,” *Atlantic*, May 1992, 106–112.

⁶⁰Gage, 161, 176. If Hoover hadn't died a few weeks before the arrest of the Watergate burglars, the “imperious bureaucrat . . . would have been furious,” author Sanford Ungar wrote—not about the break-in and violation of civil liberties but about White House “encroachment” on Hoover's terrain. “How he would have reacted when he discovered just how high complicity in the cover-up went—and that the President himself was involved—is hard to say. . . but he had certainly never hesitated in the past to defy and distress presidents.” On the other hand, Hoover had also covered up presidential scandals in previous administrations to maintain his hold on power. Ungar, 528; and Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy: His Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 267–268, 447–448.

ated mirror images of each other. The virtuous interpretation rests on what some media scholars have called a catalyst model of media agenda-setting: press disclosures of wrongdoing forced authorities to act, ultimately leading to Nixon's resignation. The villainous narrative, in which Felt or the military or the CIA manipulated the media, fits into what has been called a ventriloquist model of agenda setting: a stage-managed process in which journalists function as puppets, silently moving their own lips to cover the voice of their ventriloquist sources. Both models are extreme theoretical archetypes—the first, idealized, the second, demonized—used, as are many academic typologies, less for their verisimilitude than as a way to clarify and refine analysis.⁶¹

But neither extreme aptly characterizes the nuances of journalism during Watergate.⁶² From the start, a more modulated, minimalist interpretation also emerged.

In July of 1974, a month before Nixon resigned, Edward Jay Epstein pointed out in *Commentary* magazine that “it was not the press which exposed Watergate; it was agencies of government itself.” Epstein, a political scientist who taught at UCLA and MIT, credited “the investigations conducted by the FBI, the federal prosecutors, the grand jury, and the Congressional committees” for having “unearthed and developed all the actual evidence” implicating the Nixon White House. Woodstein “systematically ignored or minimized” this crucial fact in their “autobiographical account of how they ‘revealed’ the Watergate scandals” by focusing only “on those parts of the prosecutors’ case, the grand-jury investigation, and the FBI reports that were leaked to them.”

⁶¹Mark Feldstein, “Dummies and Ventriloquists: Models of How Sources Set the Investigative Agenda,” *Journalism: Theory, Practice, and Criticism* 8, no. 5 (Fall 2007): 543–553.

⁶²Actually, Watergate was not a story that truly lent itself to original investigative reporting in the first place. *Time* magazine investigative reporter Sandy Smith, who also received Watergate leaks from Felt and broke several important stories about the scandal, estimated that “less than two percent” of his reporting “was truly original investigation. . . . People forget that the government was investigating all the time. . . [that] government investigators found the stuff and gave us something to expose.” Original investigative journalism, as defined by the premier national nonprofit organization that trains such reporters in the US, means more than merely serving as a receptacle for leaks, or even prying them out of reluctant government officials, no matter how important such stories might eventually turn out to be. Rather, it is “one’s own work product and initiative. . . not a report of an investigation made by someone else” such as police, prosecutors, or congressional committees. In Watergate, because the political figures implicated faced significant legal jeopardy, the evidence of wrongdoing they possessed was generally too dangerous to entrust to reporters and could be confided safely only to their own attorneys or to law enforcement officials. So like more routine coverage of other grand jury probes, Watergate journalism was largely and necessarily derivative, reporting on investigations by authorities that were already under way before news outlets began covering them. Holland, 180; Steve Weinberg, *The Reporter’s Handbook* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1983), vii–viii; Mollenhoff, 19; and Feldstein, *Poisoning the Press*, 299.

As a social scientist, Epstein recognized the difference between causation and correlation. He was attuned to the complex interactions of multiple variables in political (and other) outcomes; and a monocausal explanation, media-centric or otherwise, automatically invited skepticism. Epstein explained how the FBI (not the press) traced the serial numbers of the hundred-dollar bills carried by the Watergate burglars and linked the White House to the conspiracy—within a week of the Watergate break-in. Soon after, law enforcement authorities learned of other Nixonian burglaries, thanks to “prosecutors’ skill in threatening” a Watergate co-conspirator with prison if he didn’t cooperate. The presiding federal judge, John Sirica, followed suit, and the president’s men fell one by one like dominos, implicating higher-ups and revealing the audiotaped evidence that proved Nixon’s criminality. At best, Woodstein and other reporters merely “leaked elements of the prosecutors’ case to the public in advance of [a] trial,” Epstein wrote. While this “did of course add fuel to the fire,” the two reporters weren’t even “the only ones publicizing the case,” which was also stoked independently by outspoken Nixon opponents through attention-getting lawsuits and congressional investigations.⁶³

Another scholar, historian Stanley Kutler, corroborated this interpretation by meticulously comparing the chronology of thousands of declassified FBI field reports on Watergate with journalistic coverage from that time. “[M]edia revelations of crimes and political misdeeds repeated what was already known to properly constituted investigative authorities,” Kutler found; “carefully timed leaks, not media investigations, provided the first news of Watergate.” (As for the heroic narrative of *All the President’s Men*, it was “self-serving” and “exaggerated,” Kutler concluded, and its cartoonish reduction of Watergate “to a modern-day version of *The Front Page*” trivialized the “infinitely richer and more complex” Watergate “mosaic.”⁶⁴)

Other scholars with different methodological approaches have also been skeptical of journalism’s impact during Watergate. In an analysis of polling

⁶³Epstein’s interpretation relied on Watergate prosecutors, who were obviously as irked at the canonizing of Woodstein as their journalistic rivals and gave the political scientist “a documented account of the [government] investigation.” One prosecutor, Seymour Glanzer, complained later that “Woodward and Bernstein followed in our wake. The idea that they were this great investigative team was a bunch of baloney.” At the time, Epstein reported that prosecutors believed that Felt was Deep Throat and that his motive was “not to expose the Watergate conspiracy or drive President Nixon from office, but simply to demonstrate to the President that [then-FBI director L. Patrick] Gray could not control the FBI, and therefore would prove a severe embarrassment to his administration. In other words, the intention was to get rid of Gray. . . . If instead of chastising the press, President Nixon and his staff had correctly identified the ‘signals’ from the FBI, and had replaced Gray with an FBI executive, things might have turned out differently.” Epstein, “Did the Press Uncover Watergate?”; and Feldstein, “Watergate Remembered,” 65.

⁶⁴Kutler, *Wars of Watergate*, 190, viii, 615, 459; and Kutler, “Watergate Misremembered.”

data to measure media effects, communication scholars Gladys and Kurt Lang suggested that media-centric interpretations of Watergate conflate cause with effect. Journalism's "main contribution," the husband-and-wife team found, was merely covering daily news of the scandal that was already taking place: "That so many of the struggles between Nixon and his opponents should have had such wide publicity" led to "the impression that the news media. . . forced the downfall of Richard Nixon," the Langs wrote. But both Nixon and his adversaries "used the media" during Watergate; this "inevitably enlarged" the conflict, but "beyond that it is difficult to demonstrate, in the narrowly scientific way that has become the researcher's norm," that journalism "directly changed people's opinion. . . . Many media effects remain elusive and can be understood only as the outcome of a cumulative process."⁶⁵

To be sure, public opinion polling is an imperfect instrument, with limited capacity to measure journalism's effect on Washington elites—prosecutors, judges, members of Congress—whose official actions directly brought Nixon down. The impact of news coverage on government authorities is often subtle and difficult to measure; officials may be reluctant to acknowledge even to themselves that they are responding to the press because it suggests that they previously weren't doing their jobs properly. Publicity can push authorities to take action, if only to avoid being embarrassed by media disclosures.⁶⁶ As Nixon advisor Leonard Garment observed: "What a government organization investigates, how wide it casts its net, what others will think of the often-inconclusive information it turns up—all these things are mightily influenced" by "knowledge and opinion among both the population as a whole

⁶⁵Lang and Lang, 303–304. "The media did not impeach Nixon," the Langs noted pointedly, though the journalism outlets "had a part in the extended maneuvering" that culminated in Nixon's resignation. While the "news media were not an outside or extraneous force whose influence on the course of Watergate can be isolated from other influences," they found, news "headlines alone would not have sufficed to make a serious issue out of a problem so removed from most people's daily concerns." The "moving force behind the effort to get to the bottom of Watergate came neither from the media nor public opinion but from political insiders." In this sense, Nixon's imminent impeachment resembled President Andrew Johnson's in 1868, which was caused primarily by congressional elites, not the press or public opinion—even though the nation's "harsh" and "intensely partisan" newspaper coverage mostly pushed for Johnson's ouster. (Ultimately, the Senate refused to remove Johnson from office, perhaps because the process lacked the legitimacy associated with Nixon's departure, which media coverage had arguably helped prepare the public to accept.) *Ibid.*, xii, 58, 301, 281–284, 296.

⁶⁶Woodward argued that the evidence of White House criminality unearthed by the FBI "wasn't going anywhere until it was [made] public" in the news media, and that the Senate Watergate Committee's "work grew out of the stories that we did" after its chairman, Sam Ervin, asked for Woodward's help supplying investigative leads. "Senators don't decide to investigate in a vacuum," the reporter pointed out. (However, Woodward actually didn't give Ervin much help, and their conversation occurred on a day when the senator was also meeting with other investigative journalists, generating publicity for his probe as well as fishing for leads.) Woodward, *Secret Man*, 121; Feldstein, "Watergate Remembered," 65; Bernstein and Woodward, 248; and Sam Dash, *Chief Counsel: Inside the Ervin Committee—the Untold Story of Watergate* (New York: Random House, 1976), 24.

and interested elites. This climate, in turn, is shaped in significant part by the press.”⁶⁷

Still, most scholars have embraced a multi-causal analysis of Watergate. As its leading historian Kutler explained: “The fact is an incredible array of powerful actors all converged on Nixon at once—the FBI, prosecutors, congressional investigators, the judicial system. This included the media. It did not play the leading role, but it did play a role.”⁶⁸

Ultimately, differing interpretations of Watergate journalism appear to reflect differing professional roles and methodological approaches. News reporters cover stories close up, in real time, while they are still unfolding, when events seem contingent and ultimate endings cannot be known. Historians, on the other hand, view the past from a distance, when outcomes are already determined and can appear predictable, if not inevitable. Proximity brings journalists close to Great and Terrible Men alike, accentuating the role of the individual. Distance separates scholars from historical actors, offering a wider perspective in which the past is shaped by larger, systemic forces—political, economic, social, cultural, technological. Yet both institutions and individuals matter, British historian John Arnold recognized, because “the things that they do cause ripples, spreading outwards beyond their own moment, interacting with ripples from a million other lives. Somewhere in the patterns formed by these colliding waves, history happens.”⁶⁹

In the end, absolute certainty about journalism’s impact on Watergate remains unknowable. Would Nixon still have been forced out of the White House if Bob Woodward hadn’t been born? Or Mark Felt?⁷⁰ Absent a parallel universe, such counterfactual questions can never be answered conclusively.

⁶⁷Garment, *In Search of Deep Throat*, 142. Yet even Garment—who wrote that Woodward’s “eye-popping stories” helped build “momentum and drew in the rest of the press at a time when Watergate might otherwise have faded from public view”—estimated that media coverage merely “accelerated the pace” of the scandal’s unraveling “by somewhere from six months to a year,” not that the final outcome would have been different. Leonard Garment, *Crazy Rhythm: From Brooklyn and Jazz to Nixon’s White House, Watergate, and Beyond* (New York: Times Books, 1997), 249.

⁶⁸Feldstein, “Watergate Remembered,” 67.

⁶⁹John H. Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000), 93.

⁷⁰The birth of a more obscure Watergate figure was arguably more responsible for Nixon’s resignation than either Woodward or Felt: Frank Wills, the young African American security guard at the Watergate building who first noticed evidence of the break-in while it was in progress and called police to the scene. “If it wasn’t for me,” he realized, “Woodward and Bernstein would not have known anything about Watergate.” But Wills’s “agency”—his individual capacity to act independently—seems to have been more historic than personal. Unlike Watergate’s affluent journalistic watchdogs, the actual night watchman died penniless at age 52. And unlike Nixon, who received a presidential pardon for his many felonies, several years later Wills received a one-year prison sentence for shoplifting a \$12 pair of sneakers. Adam Bernstein, “Frank Wills, Detected Watergate Break-In,” *Washington Post*, September 20, 2000; and “Watergate Guard Led Quiet Life,” *Augusta, GA Chronicle*, September 30, 2000.

By now, though, the question seems to have moved beyond the provenance of journalism or history or political science—and instead entered the realm of legend. Despite its historical inaccuracy, Watergate’s media mythology survives, in the words of sociologist Schudson, “impervious to critique. It offers journalism . . . a kind of larger truth that is precisely what myths are for”—not to tell us “in empirical detail” what really happened in the past, but to inspire us in the future.⁷¹

Not that the debate will likely die down anytime soon. If, as the Dutch scholar Pieter Geyl said, history is an argument without end, we will continue to wallow in Watergate for many years to come.

⁷¹Schudson, *Watergate in American Memory*, 124.