

'All the President's Men Revisited' – not just a nostalgia trip

By Hank Stuever, *Washington Post*

Around here, the offer of watching a two-hour documentary about how *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein chased the Watergate story is about as appealing as taking the car into the shop to get the tires rotated. I'm looking at the calendar and not seeing what we like to call the peg. (The 40th anniversary of the middle of the Watergate saga? The 37th anniversary of the movie premiere of "All the President's Men?" The 563rd anniversary of the printing press?)

Yet here I sit, thoroughly absorbed by executive producer/narrator Robert Redford's "All the President's Men Revisited," a fresh and even stirring reminiscence airing this Sunday on Discovery.

Redford and his crew, including director Peter Schnall, stylishly manage what countless think tank and j-school panel discussions struggle to do – cut through the recollections of the major players (Woodward, Bernstein, their boss Ben Bradlee, Nixon White House counsel John Dean, etc.) and utilize their well-trod anecdotes and war stories in a way that seems new.

Because let's face it: Watergate is fading before our eyes. For measuring distance, we in 2013 are now farther away from the events portrayed in "All the President's Men" than the film "Bonnie and Clyde" was from the real Bonnie and Clyde. Richard Nixon himself is nearly 20 years gone. Mark Felt, the former FBI official who outed himself as Deep Throat in 2005, died four-plus years ago. And while the *Post* legends and ex-

White House staffers (the film also talks to Hugh W. Sloan, Bud Krogh and Alexander Butterfield) come across as a relatively hale bunch in this film, it is in fact the younger interview subjects who do the most to revivify the entire saga as both a political and cultural watershed.

Thus Jon Stewart of "The Daily Show" shares a bit of the ubiquitous and jowly impression of Richard Nixon he used to do as a boy. (Any American who was a child during the Watergate years remembers how you could get the adults in the room to laugh and pay attention to you with a well-timed slouch and "I am not a crook." You didn't even really have to know what it meant.) "Ten years old [and] I had my Nixon down," Stewart says in the film. "Now I have a much more complex view of the man and his presidency. The sad truth is, I think Nixon would by today's standards be considered maybe a conservative Democrat, [and] maybe at some levels a radical leftist."

And MSNBC's Rachel Maddow, who was an infant during the Watergate hearings, is always good at giving history's constitutional crises a relevant place in today's conversation: "Richard Nixon is now the guy who, when you see photos of him even at his prime, you cannot believe he was ever president of the United States."

It's smart of Redford and company to acknowledge all this. But their "All the President's Men Revisited" is no Watergate for Dummies, either; it is as concerned with the historical ramifications as it is with the imprint on popular lore and culture. Those who lived through it will find what they're looking for, whether it's a renewed sense of apoplexy or even just bemusement. Those who came along after won't feel that familiar shame of being treated like a kid.

Through his narration, Redford, who portrayed Woodward in Alan J. Pakula's still popular 1976 movie, makes clear that he's working out a couple of things here: What is Watergate's resonance? What do we – as a culture – remember most? What's

different about the world now when compared to the world of 1972? He's as interested in talking to people like Sloan and Dean as he is in talking to his old pal (and co-star) Dustin Hoffman, who played Bernstein.

"I was amazed by Woodward and Bernstein's resolve," Redford tells the viewer. "There's nothing glamorous about what they were doing, but I thought it was important to portray the tedium, the hard work. And the feelings about the film from the studio's standpoint was [that the story was] noncommercial. 'Newspapers, typewriters, phones? Huh-unh,' " Redford characterizes the lukewarm-to-negative response in Hollywood. "'Washington? Huh-unh.'"

It turned out that the trappings and tools and personalities of journalism were, for a glorious moment, incredibly sexy. Now Redford and his crew return with Woodward, Bernstein and -Bradlee to the newsroom on the fifth floor of that brown, Brutalist property on 15th Street that is (you may have heard) currently for sale, probably as a teardown. With Vanity Fair photographer Annie Leibovitz there to document them, and Discovery's cameras documenting that, and a newsroom full of *Posties* observing this A-list distraction with equal measures of admiration and weariness ("Watergate, again?"), an awkward vibe of cinema verité sets in. Working at the *Post* now, one feels a reverential obligation to the work that brought us here, while hurrying like mad toward a future no one has figured out.

"It sure is quiet in here," Bernstein observes, surveying a plum- and chartreuse-schemed news operation that is centered around a starship bridge of high-def TV screens. Gone is the clatter of typewriters and jangling of phones; gone is the ability to chain-smoke at one's desk, the way Bernstein did. ("Why did things have to change?" Woodward jokingly asks.)

Rather than revel in newspaperdom's former glories, "All the President's Men Revisited" asks a very good question: If a

president's re-election committee authorized the break-in of the other party's campaign offices, how would the story unfold now? How would it be reported? How would it play?

Marcus Brauchli, who was the *Post's* executive editor at the time of the film crew's visit, gives an eloquent answer that takes into account the new media landscape and why things can never be like they were. As he describes how Twitter users and partisan watchdogs would pounce on the news of the Watergate break-in, the screen itself splinters into an effective chaos of sources, voices and information, which would simultaneously advance, spin and debunk the break-in and its impact. What took Woodward and Bernstein (and other news organizations and, lest anyone forget, prosecutors) weeks and months to piece together could come together in a day or two; the work would happen at those very cubicles Bernstein finds so unsettlingly quiet, as wonks wearing headphones dive deep into databases. Professional and amateur reporters would be following the money, in real time. "The tedium, the hard work" that Redford admired back in the '70s are what remain. As then, the skill is in the sifting, the verifying.

"All the President's Men Revisited" spends just enough time on this sort of thing without becoming one more ambivalent documentary about the future of news. Instead, it turns to the epic tragedy that was Nixon himself.

By the time the "smoking gun" tape brings the president down, the film struggles to maintain the artful distance it had so capably established for two hours; those who are old enough to remember their anger and outrage quickly rediscover it. The tape unspools and the paranoia takes hold. "It's hard to get past the tapes," political consultant Mary Matalin observes. "Just the insanity."

"The real Nixon is on those tapes," Bernstein says. "It is a road map of his mind, it is a road map of his presidency."

Ben Stein, who is glimpsed as a young man in the footage of doleful White House staffers listening to Nixon's farewell speech in the East Room ("My mother was a saint," etc.), reflects on it once more: "It's really sad. I don't think any president has been more persecuted than Nixon. I think he was a saint."

Then Stein breaks into tears, which comes off as both ridiculous and moving, depending on the viewer. This is the first project I've seen that seems to understand that, when it comes to Watergate, there is something about it that remains deeply personal, and not just for the people who experienced it firsthand. We live – and even thrive – in the crater it left behind.