A dozen years ago, just after Watergate’s famous anonymous source, “Deep Throat” had outed himself, the Washington Post’s ombudsman, Michael Getler, offered a timeless reminder about Watergate and the forces that ended Richard Nixon’s presidency in 1974. “Ultimately,” Getler wrote in his column, “it was not The Post, but the FBI, a Congress acting in bipartisan fashion and the courts that brought down the Nixon administration.”

Now, one of Getler’s distant successors at the Post, media columnist Margaret Sullivan, has returned to the lessons of Watergate and in doing so embraced the heroic-journalist trope that the Post and its then-young reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein were crucial to bringing down Nixon’s corrupt presidency.

Writing in the latest number of Columbia Journalism Review, Sullivan asserts,
that Woodward and Bernstein "uncovered the Nixon administration’s crimes and the cover-up that followed. In time, their stories helped to bring down a president who had insisted, ‘I am not a crook.’"

There’s a lot of myth in those unsourced claims.

Let’s unpack them.

First, it’s hard to credit Woodward and Bernstein with having “uncovered” the crimes of Watergate. The scandal’s seminal crime — the thwarted break-in at headquarters of the Democratic National Committee in mid-June 1972 — was at first a police beat story.

The Post and other news organizations reported on the foiled break-in the day after it happened. The Post’s article carried the byline of Alfred E. Lewis; Woodward and Bernstein were listed among the story’s contributors.

The decisive crime of Watergate, the one that brought Nixon’s downfall, was his obstructing justice in attempting to divert the FBI’s investigation of the break-in.

Nixon’s obstruction most certainly was not “uncovered” by Woodward and Bernstein. It was disclosed not long before Nixon resigned, in the release of a previously secret White House tape on which the president is heard approving the diversion scheme.

Nor did Woodward and Bernstein reveal the Nixon’s administration’s cover-up of the Watergate burglary.

That much was made quite clear long ago, in a mostly hagiographic account published, yes, in the Columbia Journalism Review in summer 1973, about a year before Nixon quit.

The journalism review lauded Woodward, Bernstein, and their editors at the Post in an article titled, “The Washington ‘Post’ and Watergate: How two Davids slew Goliath.” The subtitle referring to Woodward and Bernstein as “two Davids” was an early expression of the heroic-journalist interpretation that has long since became the dominant narrative...
Deep in the article was a passage saying that Woodward and Bernstein had “missed perhaps the most insidious acts of all — the story of the coverup and the payment of money to the Watergate defendants [charged and tried in the burglary] to buy their silence.”

The article quoted Woodward as saying about the cover-up:

“It was too high. It was held too close. Too few people knew. We couldn’t get that high.”

The article also pointed out, correctly:

“The Post did not have the whole story [of Watergate] by any means.”

That observation was effectively confirmed while the issue of Columbia Journalism Review was in circulation: In mid-July 1973, a former White House aide, Alexander Butterfield, told the Senate select committee investigating Watergate that Nixon secretly taped his Oval Office conversations, starting in 1971.

It was an explosive disclosure, a pivotal development — and a story that Woodward and Bernstein did not break.

So can it be said their Watergate stories, which won a Pulitzer Prize for the Post in 1973, also “helped to bring down a president,” as Sullivan claims? Maybe marginally, very marginally. At best.
What ended Nixon’s presidency was clear evidence that he had approved the plan, brought to him in June 1972 by his top aide, H.R. Haldeman, to divert the FBI investigation. And that evidence emerged from the White House tapes, not from pages of the Washington Post.

Media myths: Prominent cases of fake news masquerading as fact (https://mediamythalert.wordpress.com/2016/12/14/media-myths-prominent-cases-of-fake-news-masquerading-as-fact/)
Sullivan’s myth-embracing claims in Columbia Journalism Review represent something of a break with views of the Post’s Watergate principals, who insisted over the years that the newspaper did not take down Nixon.

Katharine Graham (https://mediamythalert.wordpress.com/2015/04/16/katharine-graham-the-economist-and-bringing-down-nixon/), the Post’s publisher during Watergate, said in 1997, for example:

“Sometimes, people accuse us of bringing down a president, which of course we didn’t do. The processes that caused [Nixon’s] resignation were constitutional.”

The Post’s executive editor during Watergate, Ben Bradlee (https://mediamythalert.wordpress.com/2014/10/22/media-myth-adulation-figure-in-media-tributes-to-ben-bradlee/), spoke similarly about the newspaper’s role in Watergate, insisting that “it must be remembered that Nixon got Nixon. The Post didn’t get Nixon.” (He was referring to the White House tapes that revealed Nixon’s guilty conduct.)

And Woodward said in an interview (http://ajrarchive.org/article.asp?id=3735) in 2004 with the now-defunct American Journalism Review:

“To say that the press brought down Nixon, that’s horseshit.”

Graham, Bradley, and Woodward in his earthy way all were correct.

To roll up a scandal of Watergate’s dimensions, as I wrote in my media-mythbusting book Getting It Wrong (https://www.amazon.com/Getting-Wrong-Debunking-Greatest-Journalism/dp/0520291298/ref=asap_bc?ie=UTF8), “required the collective if not always the coordinated forces of special prosecutors, federal judges, both houses of Congress, the Supreme Court, as well as the Justice Department and the FBI.”

And against the tableau of subpoena-wielding investigators, the contributions of Woodward and Bernstein recede in significance (https://mediamythalert.wordpress.com/2010/07/25/what-was-decisive-in-watergates-outcome/).

It surely is not excessive, in discussing the heroic-journalist myth (https://mediamythalert.wordpress.com/2011/10/25/historian-dismisses-as-self-promotion-the-heroic-journalist-interpretation-of-watergate/), to include a reminder of the ethical lapses Woodward and Bernstein committed in pursuing the Watergate story. These lapses are typically forgotten these days, even though some of them were acknowledged in All the President’s Men (https://mediamythalert.wordpress.com/2011/04/27/follow-the-money-you-wont-find-that-line-in-the-book/), the book about their Watergate reporting.
Woodward and Bernstein recounted in the book their failed attempts to entice federal grand jurors to violate oaths of secrecy and discuss testimony the grand jurors had heard about Watergate. The reporters conceded these efforts were “a seedy venture” that nonetheless had the approval of top editors at the Post, including Bradlee.

According to All the President’s Men, Woodward “wondered whether there was ever justification for a reporter to entice someone across the line of legality while standing safely on the right side himself.” Such qualms notwithstanding, they went ahead with what they described as a “clumsy charade with about half a dozen members of the grand jury.”

The overtures to grand jurors to violate secrecy commitments were soon reported to federal prosecutors who in turn informed John Sirica, chief judge of U.S. District Court in the District of Columbia.

“John Sirica is some kind of pissed at you,” the Post’s lawyer, Edward Bennett Williams, told the reporters, according to All the President’s Men. “We had to do a lot of convincing to keep your asses out of jail.”

Bernstein also acknowledged in All the President’s Men that he sought and obtained information from otherwise private telephone records. It was, as media critic Jack Shafer once wrote (http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/press_box/2004/09/broders_blindness.2.html), a matter of Bernstein’s having knowingly crossed an ethical line.


“So you deliberately blew a source,” said David Martin, the CBS interviewer. “What’s the ethics of that?”

“Probably not terribly good,” Bernstein replied.

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