

Bob Woodward: Still Seeking the Truth

By Tim Dietz – SSA VP, Communications & Government Relations

Bob Woodward is not an apologist. Nor is he judge and jury. More than 35 years and 16 books after Watergate, the reporter says his goal remains hunting for the truth and seeking transparency in information, particularly among those who govern. Woodward, perhaps the country's most preeminent investigative reporter, the man who broke the most famous story about the most infamous political scandal in modern history, will speak as part of the SSA's Foundation Forum at the SSA Fall Conference & Trade Show in Las Vegas on September 11.

Time hasn't slowed this newsroom character. The wonderkid from the Metro Desk of *The Washington Post* is now the tenured veteran who boasts a lifetime of literary achievements, including whole volumes that discuss every White House administration since Nixon. Woodward says that in Las Vegas he will talk about not just the Watergate era, but about everything since, including the "now." "I think it's important for people to not only hear the old war stories, but to grasp how we got to where we are," he says.

Despite his cache of bestsellers, Woodward at his core is still a newspaper man—officially an associate editor at the *Post*. Today, you'll find his byline in the same front-page space where it helped hasten the departure of President Nixon from the White House in August, 1974. Just last month, he accompanied President Obama's national security advisor, General James Jones, Jr., to Afghanistan and Pakistan during one of the most critical periods that region has experienced since the war began in 2001. If nothing else, his travels and coverage of such issues demonstrate that this is still a relevant, contemporary reporter.



Woodward's reporting style has attracted plenty of critics. He often will use unnamed, anonymous sources, leading to skepticism from political and literary circles. David Gergen, who worked in the Nixon White House and with other administrations, says Woodward makes up for the absence of firm sources by using extensive research. "I don't accept everything he writes as gospel—he can get details wrong—but generally, his accounts in both his books and in the *Post* are remarkably reliable and demand serious attention," said Gergen.

On Watergate

Woodward does not shy away from the story that brought him acclaim from most, contempt from some, and fame just about everywhere—including Hollywood. (You'll recall Robert Redford played him in the 1976 feature film, *All the President's Men*.) It doesn't appear that the attention or his continued success has turned him into the insufferable elitist you'd expect. He's patient in his delivery, belying the tenacious reporter stereotype, and he listens carefully, probably the greatest attribute of a thorough correspondent.

Woodward still has strong opinions about the Nixon White House, where "clearly there was a conspiracy to subvert the law and obstruct justice," he says. Asked if he has come to respect any of the involved Nixon Administration characters, he struggles to find a name. "John Dean writes about a lot of introspection in his book, *Blind Ambition*," says Woodward.

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About one of the players most notably linked to the political dirty tricks, G. Gordon Liddy, Woodward says the convicted aide and current radio host just sees the world from a completely different frame of reference. "Liddy thinks it's OK to break the law to advance his agenda," he says. "I consider that to be a very alarming view of the law."

Chuck Colson was also one of the "President's men" who served time for obstruction of justice. Woodward recognizes that the former special counsel to Nixon has done good work in terms of prison reform, but that he "still has the heart of a killer." He went on to say that, "I don't think any of them liked me very much."

On Deep Throat

Perhaps the most intriguing character from the Watergate scandal was former FBI associate director Mark Felt. For 30 years, Felt was considered a relatively peripheral player in Watergate lore, but that all changed when, as an elderly retiree, he decided it was time to "out himself" as the mysterious Deep Throat. In cloak and dagger fashion, Felt became Woodward's secret source as the scandal unfolded, meeting late at night in parking lots and demanding absolute anonymity for information provided.

"He was not the most willing source," says Woodward. "I had to pester him. And he didn't like the way some things unfolded." In particular, Felt wasn't happy that he had been labeled with a nickname that was derived from the world of pornography. It took some explaining from Woodward, who told Felt that in the newsroom the name had taken on a life of its own.

The unique and ultimately fortuitous relationship had begun before Woodward became a reporter. He'd met Felt years earlier as an aide at the Pentagon when he had delivered papers to the White House briefing room. They stayed in touch as Woodward joined the *Montgomery* (Maryland) *Sentinel* and then *The Washington Post*. By the time Watergate was in the news, the two had a relatively comfortable, though informal, rapport.

In his position at the FBI, Felt saw everything compiled about Watergate and became frustrated with the pace of the investigation. Woodward says this was more than a case of a simple, bitter whistleblower. "Yes, there was personal disappointment about being passed over as FBI director after J. Edgar Hoover died. But also, this was somebody deeply concerned about the injustices he saw," he said.

In later years Woodward says the two shared a genuine affection and that after he came out as the fabled Watergate source, "it was liberating for him."

On the Bush Years

In all, Bob Woodward wrote four books about the Bush administration. Why so many? "Because these were momentous issues. Thousands of men and women have died and it's important that we know about it and understand the truth," according to Woodward. The reporter interviewed Bush often about his decisions and the aftermath of those decisions.

"I think that at first you saw initial success in Afghanistan, following 9/11," he said. "Then he felt momentum and believed that he had to go in and do Iraq. (Because of the success in Afghanistan) he thought it would be easier, that it would be a good thing. But he didn't expect the tragedy of the insurgency."

Woodward continues, "Forget waterboarding or eavesdropping. What will define Bush is these wars."

Six months into the Obama presidency, Woodward remains close to the story and like all Americans is watching the gradual withdrawal of U.S. troops. "We'll see how it goes," he says. "This is very sobering for Obama. Over at the White House they are seeing what a dangerous world we are now in."

On John Belushi

In the early 1980s, Woodward departed from his political comfort zone to write *Wired*, about the overdose death of John Belushi.

"We came from the same hometown of Wheaton, Illinois. I thought it was an important story, a first-hand account of how addictive and destructive cocaine use can be. In many ways it was the same story as Watergate: the failure of success."

On Blogging

How does the country's most heralded investigative reporter feel about Internet blogging as it compares to investigative reporting? "I guess I really believe in the First Amendment, and therefore I welcome all the blogging. I don't think it yet adds a lot, with some obvious exceptions. But I hope it will get better and better with time."

Bob Woodward will speak at 10:00 a.m. on September 11, 2009, at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas. Visit www.selfstorage.org for more information. ❖