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# Voices on Campus - Bob Woodward: What Journalism is About

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# VOICES ON CAMPUS

Bob Woodward:

## *What Journalism is About*

On December 3, 2012, BSU was privileged to host and hear Pulitzer-Prize-winning journalist and executive editor of the *Washington Post*, Bob Woodward, as part of the President's Distinguished Speakers Series. Mr. Woodward's path-breaking reportage about the 1972 Watergate incident uncovered criminal conspiracy at the government's highest levels and led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon. With his colleague, Carl Bernstein, Woodward set the standard for generations of investigative journalism in the U.S. and opened the eyes of Americans to the concentration of power in the presidency and its potential for corruption. In the 40 years since, Woodward has had a tremendously productive career as a journalist, editor and political pundit, one that has included the publication of 17 non-fiction books on American politics. His Bridgewater talk, excerpted below, outlined the essence of good journalism and the daunting challenge of getting the story right.—BR

**H**ow much do we know about what goes on in politics and among politicians? This is the question that plagues journalism. And it is so relevant to your lives as citizens. Do we know who these people are? Do we know what they actually intend? Once, I asked Al Gore, how much of interest or of consequence do we know about what went on in the Clinton White House. "You were there for eight years as the Vice President." This was in 2005, this was five years after they'd left office, after dozens of books, 24/7 coverage, and two investigations—Whitewater and Monica Lewinsky. So how much, what percentage of the core of what we should know, do we now know? And he said: "one percent."

This is our challenge. What do you do, as somebody in my business, to get high-quality, authoritative information of the kind that so often people don't want you to know? The answer is a strong sense of mission and a commitment to getting it right.

First, mission. We talk about leadership and we wonder exactly what it is and what it means. I want to tell a war story about when I got a glimpse of leadership. It... had to do with the *Washington Post* when we were working on the Watergate story. Katharine Graham was the publisher and owner

of the *Post*, and she supported the publication of these stories. There was a lunch she had invited me to, just myself (Carl had had to go to a funeral) and the managing editor. This was in January 1973. We had written these stories saying that there were secret funds and a massive campaign of political spying, espionage, sabotage aimed at the Democrats, and provided a good deal of detail. The big problem was no one believed them. Nixon was too smart. This was inconceivable. You could not have this kind of activity going on in a president's re-election committee or his

White House. So I went up to lunch. When I came in, she stared me down and started asking me about Watergate. She blew my mind with what she knew. Her intellectual engagement could not be higher. At one point she said I've been reading the following about Watergate in the *Chicago Tribune!* Here she was, scooping it all up. Her management style was "mind on, hands off." Mind fully engaged in what our job was, but hands off—didn't tell us how to report, didn't tell the editors how to edit, what to investigate, what not to investigate.

At that moment, Nixon was about to go to his second inaugural. He had won a massive landslide victory over George McGovern, winning 60% of the popular vote and over 500 electoral votes. It was a wipeout... In addition, in January 1973, one of the secret strategies of the Nixon campaign was to get people to challenge the FCC television licenses that the *Washington Post* company owned. These licenses were very valuable. The challenges themselves sent the stock into the toilet. So, the *Post's* stock was in the toilet, its journalists' reputation was submerged in the toilet and I'm having lunch, with her asking about Watergate. At the end, she had the killer CEO question: when are we going to find out the whole truth about Watergate? When is it all going to come out? I said that because it was a criminal conspiracy and all the incentives were not to talk about it, because when Carl and I went to visit people at their homes at night, more often than not, they slammed the doors in our faces with a real sense of fear, because the Watergate five burglars who were caught in the Democratic headquarters were being paid for their silence. [Because of all of these things] I said "never." She looked across the lunch table with a look of pain and bewilderment, and said: "Never? Don't tell me never." I left the lunch a highly motivated employee. "Never? Don't tell me never" was not a threat, and this is what was important



about it. It was a statement of purpose. What she said to me was “Use all of our resources, use all of the resources to get to the bottom of this. Why? Because this is what we do. This is why we have protection under the First Amendment. This is our tradition. We don’t give up and I will not be told ‘Never.’” ... I was 29 years old at the time, and to have the boss say in the face of economic and reputational peril “Let’s keep going” is a lift that you don’t often get in your life. Someday, we’re going to put a plaque in the lobby of the *Washington Post*, and we’re going to bolt it in so no one can ever take it out, and it will say: “Never? Don’t tell me never. Katharine Graham, January, 1973.” There was somebody who knew what journalism is about.

The other point I want to make is equally important: If you don’t do the work, you get it wrong, you miss the story, you don’t comprehend what it means. Thirty days after Nixon resigned and Gerald Ford was President, Ford went on television early one Sunday morning and announced that he was giving Nixon a full, total pardon for Watergate. He went on television early on a Sunday morning

hoping no one would notice. But it was widely noticed. There was the larger question of justice—why does the person at the top, the President, get a pardon and 40 people go to jail, hundreds of people have their lives wrecked in one way or another? I thought, at the time and for years after, there’s something smelly about the pardon. Two years after the pardon was announced and granted, in the ’76 election, Ford ran against Carter and Carter won, in large part, because he had nothing to do with Washington, and because Ford still hadn’t answered that question of what happened with the pardon ...

Twenty-five years later, I called up Gerald Ford. I had never met him, had never interviewed him, and said that I’d like to interview him about the pardon, figuring that he would slam down the phone. But he said, “Fine.” So I... interviewed him at length, many times. I followed my method: got all the legal memos, interviewed

you can guarantee the president gets a pardon, he’s going to resign and you’ll be president.’ The deal was offered, but I rejected it. I did not pardon Nixon for Nixon, or for me—I knew I was going to become president. Nixon was finished, he was going to be impeached in the House and thrown out of office; it was inevitable. I pardoned Nixon for the country.” At the moment in ’74, there were hard economic times, we were in the middle of the Cold War, it was a time of great difficulty. Ford concluded, “I had to get Watergate off the front page. If he was investigated, indicted and tried, we would have two or three more years of Nixon and Watergate. We could not stand it. I had to pardon Nixon.”

I can’t tell you how sobering it is to be so sure that things are one way: the pardon is corrupt, unjust, a deal, a manifestation of the worst of our politics. And then, 25 years later, it’s subjected to neutral inquiry, and what was

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## What was thought to be [one] way turns out to be exactly the opposite; the pardon was a manifestation of the *best* in our politics, not the worst...

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and re-interviewed anyone who had any knowledge of the pardon, read all the contemporaneous journalism, read all the memoirs, going back, sifting. What happened here? I remember saying to him, “You know, I’ve spent a lot of time on this and I don’t know why; why’d you do this?” He said, “You keep asking that question.” And I said, “Well, you haven’t answered it. Why not now?” He said, “OK, I’ll tell you. Al Haig, Nixon’s chief of staff, came and offered me a deal: ‘If

thought to be this way turns out to be exactly the opposite; the pardon was a manifestation of the *best* in our politics, not the worst...

But even with a sense of mission and hard work, comes one final caveat: After all this, we may still get it wrong. As I go about my business, you get information, you make judgments, but with the locked-in understanding in your stomach that that may be wrong, you may not have it, you may not have figured it out...