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Fogler Library: William S. Cohen Lecture with Bob Woodward

William S. Cohen

Bob Woodward

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Fogler Library: William S. Cohen Lecture with Bob Woodward

Date: 2007

Run Time: 01:27:27

Presenters: William S. Cohen, Bob Woodward

Video recording of the 2007 conversation between William S. Cohen and Bob Woodward about the Watergate Investigations. The Cohen Lecture Series began in 1997 with the deposit of 1300 boxes of Cohen's papers to Raymond H. Fogler Library Special Collections. The Cohen collection documents over 25 years of Mr. Cohen's service to Maine and the United States. The Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein Watergate Papers are held at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas.

The following is an unedited, machine generated transcript. Alternatively, you may wish to activate your web browser's live captioning function.

Begin Transcript

0:01

good afternoon once again and welcome to this afternoon's event please welcome human
Dean of libraries

0:07

Joyce rumery I'd like to welcome you to

0:20

the University of Maine this afternoon Fogell library is very pleased to be co-hosting with the
William S Cohen

0:26

Center for international policy and commerce the tenth anniversary events which celebrate the
donation of the

0:33

Cohen papers in 1997 and the beginning of the Cohen lecture series the papers

0:39

which arrived on campus in 1300 boxes for the Congressional years and 16 CDs

0:45

for the Pentagon years document over a quarter century of service to Maine and

0:51

our nation spanning six presidencies to historical constitutional crises the end

0:58

of the Cold War and thousands of votes in Congress we are extremely grateful

1:04

for the support of our sponsors for today's events Bangor Daily News WL bz2

1:12

WCS h6 and the Gannett foundation Alan Miller fund for excellence in

1:18

communication and journalism the Honors College and the College of Liberal Arts

1:23

and Sciences to recognize the role of our distinguished guests in the

1:29

Watergate investigations we've put together a short video of archival material from several sources including

1:35

the Woodward and Bernstein papers at the University of Texas and the William S Cohen papers and special collections

1:41

here at Fogler library many of us will experience a bit of time travel as we

1:47

watch while for our younger audience members will provide an introduction to today's conversational Watergate I hope

1:54

you enjoy this video presentation the rest of today's forum thank you for joining us here today

2:02

you

2:18

we had done some of the first work on this that any suggestion that we had

2:24

caused it or brought down a president was a stretch to say the least and not

2:33

actual if the missing tape had not been released

2:38

in that summer of 1974 in all probability I would not have been reelected it is a process of the

2:45

judiciary the Congress the Supreme Court that led to Nixon's demise but then of

2:55

course if you think about it [Music] is the one who duty of still skill and

3:03

at some point in time he could have gone to the American people and said we made

3:08

some mistakes I let this thing get out of hand there was there was wrongdoing that took place

3:21

[Music]

3:35

the important discovery for Carl and myself was the water gig wasn't isolated

3:41

there were other burglaries there were there was a whole intelligence gathering

3:48

apparatus there were spies and all the Democratic candidates campaigns that had

3:55

been planted and were paid by the Nixon campaign I think the Watergate is

4:06

certainly cast a very dark shadow over over the Republican Party and the administration there's been a great deal

4:14

of doubt and cynicism that's been generated as a result of what they call the Saturday massacre

4:26

[Music] senator will President Nixon be invited or perhaps even subpoenaed to testify

4:33

before the Senate committee I very much doubt that you can subpoena a president to do anything except possibly to stand

4:40

before the bar of the Senate in the case of the trial of articles of impeachment returned by the House of Representatives

4:47

to go to the center of the matter is the president under investigation by the Senate committee we are going to examine

4:55

every lead we're going to examine every suggestion and we're going to take into account every statement wherever that

5:01

leads us hundred thousand pages of documents from the Senate Watergate

5:07

committee all the material from the grand jury also all of that that was turned over to Joyce Keyes office in

5:13

addition to all of the hearings that were held on the confirmation of Kleindienst and Richardson and Henry

5:18

Kissinger and others it's an overwhelming amount of material let's examine what the president did know is

5:24

at that time but I look at page 10 and I

5:37

read from where the president said I want the most I want the most comprehensive notes on all of those that have tried to do us in because they

5:42

didn't have to do it and Dean says that's right they didn't have to do it circumstantial evidence is just as valid

5:49

evidence in the life of the law and that of logic as is direct evidence in fact

5:55

sometimes I think it's much stronger if you went to sleep at night the ground

6:00

was bare outside and you woke up with fresh snow on the ground you go to bed

6:07

at night there's no snow on the ground you wake up no snow then certainly you would conclude as a reasonable person

6:12

that snow had fallen even if you hadn't seen it there are some who would have you believe that the White House has

6:18

been under unfair and unmitigated assault by this Congress aided and abetted by the liberal press I happen to

6:26

think that some of the Greivis the most melancholy of wounds are those that are self-inflicted I've been faced with the

6:35

terrible responsibility of assessing the conduct for president that I voted for believed to be the best man to

6:40

this country who has made significant and lasting contributions towards securing peace in this country

6:46

throughout the world but a president who in the process by act or acquiescence

6:51

allowed the rule of law and the Constitution to slip under the boots of indifference and arrogance and abuse

7:12

in a sense the vision or the dream of

7:18

the people who wrote the Constitution has at least in part been realized our

7:27

laws and our Constitution are and they must be more than a pious wish more than a sanctimonious recital of what we

7:33

should prefer that will not insist upon because we who hold the public office

7:38

are more than simply craftsmen and draftsman who hammer out legislation for the benefit of the people of this

7:44

country we're the keepers of the flame

8:00

[Music]

Welcome

8:12

please join us in a warm humane welcome for former Secretary of Defense William Cohen
Washington Post assistant managing

8:19

editor Bob Woodward and this afternoon's moderator News Center journalist Don Kerrigan
Dawn Kerrigan

8:52

good afternoon and welcome my name is dawn Kerrigan I was a student here on this campus in

8:59

1972 when the break-in occurred matter of fact I was among the classes I took had taken the
year before was instructor

9:07

Bill Cohen's business law class so more memorable for me than for him I'm sure

9:17

to political history and to people who have been players on the national and

9:22

world stage for really for for 35 years ever since those events of quantity thank you both for
taking the time to be

9:30

with us here today and I guess what if we could start I might ask you both to just share a few
recollections a few

9:37

thoughts about Watergate and especially and how you look at how you looked at it then how
you looked at it now and then we can get to some questions and then we

9:43

will get to some questions from all of you in in a few minutes secretary Cohen well Don thank
you very

9:49

much and thanks for being such a a gifted reporter in your own right and we

9:54

have full disclosure Don also worked for me so I don't break not exactly unbiased

10:01

the questions that I may anticipate but let me say very quickly I think what

10:07

comes to my mind is how unpredictable life is when I first was elected to the

10:13

Congress I was selected to go to the JFK Institute of Politics there were four of

10:18

us at that time a young man named Allen Steelman from from Dallas upon Braithwaite Burke
from California

10:25

Barbara Jordan from Houston and myself and we spent some time at the Institute

10:32

and I had professor Moynihan with one of my professors professor Galbraith was a

10:37

professor and frankly I don't recall anything that I learned at Harvard at that time other than the director of the

10:44

program said that when you get to Washington when you they ask you for the list of committees you want to be on

10:49

make sure the committee you really want to be on you put last well that's

10:54

counterintuitive why would I want to do that they said because they will not trust you they don't know who you are and they're going to

11:00

make sure that they can judge how you're going to perform for the party and for

11:06

the Congress so just remember put it last and so I went to Washington and over the objection of my then very small

11:12

staff I put the Judiciary Committee as the last choice on five that I listed

11:18

and that's where I ended up and so I think about the the choices that we make

11:23

in life and how you can think you're setting out to do something and have no way of knowing what the future is going to hold for me

11:30

Watergate simply symbolized the axiom that all power is corrupt absolute power

11:36

being absolutely corrupt and that when you have such a concentration of power inevitably it will lead to abuse unless

11:44

you have serious checks and balances that come from one party of the other another branch of government or the

11:50

media but you must have constant vigilance and scrutiny and openness of a

11:56

political process I will tell you one other insight into my experience on the

12:02

House Judiciary Committee I was not prepared for the kind of intense

12:07

partisanship that existed on the committee how Democrats and Republicans

12:13

really didn't like each other and there was no trust amongst the the members of

12:18

the committee and I recall the time that Peter Rodino was going to he had sent a letter off to President Nixon asking him

12:25

to release all of the the tapes and present Nixon wrote back and said no he

12:32

went on television instead he held a nationwide press conference which he had all of the edited transcripts stacked up

12:39

behind the Oval Office desk and he said something to the effect of never have conversations so private that made so

12:46

public and he turned those over to the committee and the next day the committee

12:51

he started to deliberate on this what were we going to do and Republicans regino wanted to send

12:58

another letter to the present saying this is not what you asked for it's like being stopped by a policeman and he asked you for your driver's license you

13:04

give him his credit card and so we were going to he wanted to write another letter and I recall being

13:11

in a room that afternoon in which this was being discussed as to why edited

13:16

transcripts were not sufficient compliance and to a person that room they said we don't care what the the

13:24

rationale we're not going to be part of any letter going to the president the Democrats are simply trying to turn over

13:30

the election which they justifiably lost and I remember going back to my office that I asked a question I said what if

13:38

Rodina will only wants to send a letter very respectfully and say please give us

13:44

what we asked for they said no letters and I said what if I write a letter they said no letters and they started to take

13:51

a vote how many will stand together with the president and I got up and I left the room and I went back to my office

13:57

and I wrote a two or three page letter and I printed up 37 copies and I got to

14:03

the hearing room that night and I passed them out to every member and I was determined to say you must comply with

14:10

our request I will do so in a respectful way but I'm determined to get to the

14:16

facts and I can recall that evening was a pivotal moment for me because it passed by only one vote that night and

14:23

my vote happened to break the tie and it was a very tough reaction toward me for

14:30

doing that but I felt it was so important to get to the facts that that was something I needed to do that's my

14:36

memory of mr. Murray real quickly one of the questions that continually gets

14:43

raised is what was Watergate it was technically a burglary and the political

14:50

opposition headquarters but what all of reporting and investigations showed

14:56

conclusively it is that it really was an assault on the Constitution the rule of

15:04

law and as you may know I'm even today there are so many Nixon tapes they come

15:13

out there's a season that does not go by when there's not a new badge

15:18

that are released publicly at the Washington Post we call it the gift that keeps giving and it's astonishing to

15:29

listen to those tapes or read the transcripts because you see multiple

15:34

things Nixon willing to break the law anxious to

15:41

break the law ordering aides to stonewall the grand jury abuse of power

15:47

of a deep sense he had that somehow the presidency could be used as an

15:53

instrument of personal revenge if you didn't like a congressman you would try to do something very damaging or maybe

16:01

even illegal if you didn't like the Democratic Party or the nominees you set

16:07

up an extensive campaign of espionage and sabotage against the Democratic

16:14

candidates and it means when on and on was funded by hundreds of thousands of
16:19
dollars so law breaking abuse of power but also when you listen to lots of
16:27
these tapes you find that the biggest tragedy is the smallness of Nixon that
16:37
the large purpose of the presidency to do good for the maximum number of people
16:44
was rarely evident that that the dog that doesn't bark on the Nixon tapes I
16:50
never recall Nixon or any of his aides and what I've read or listened ever
16:55
saying what's good what's right it was always about Nixon let's screw somebody
17:02
who's an enemy or a perceived enemy or let's benefit give ambassadorships or
17:08
government favors to people who'd given large contributions so that's them it's
17:16
criminality it's abuse of power but it's smallness and if you look at the
17:23
watergate record then we're never gonna have anything that compares to it that
17:28
so many tapes all the people almost all the people who worked for Nixon wrote
17:34
memoirs or testified in the trial or one legal proceeding the house impeachment
17:41
inquiry the Senate Watergate committee the special prosecutor office and there's a mountain
of evidence and then
17:47
people wrote things down in memos an enemies list now I think there are lots
17:53
of politicians who have enemies lists but only in the Nixon White House would they actually
write it down so it is as
18:05
we get many decades beyond what Watergate was and in Nixon's to perjure
18:13
from office you I think if I ever wrote another book about Nixon and Watergate
18:19
which I don't plan to do but if I did it would be called the wrong man that he
18:26
was somebody he was an aberration
18:31
he was somebody disconnected with all of
18:37

or too many of the principles that are supposed to guide the conduct of the
18:42
presidency under law and that the the memory of it because it now really is a
18:49
memory gets you to thinking about what should you worry about in terms of
18:57
another Watergate and the corrosive trail to Watergate is government secrecy
19:04
and that yes some things need to be secret in government military plans
19:10
intelligence sources and so forth but they're what Nixon essentially did is he
19:15
tried to wall himself off and say we own the government it's ours we can do whatever we want
and that the remedy is
19:24
transparency and I've known bill Cohen since 1974 and what is interesting about
19:32
you and you often didn't like it or you were annoyed or I would be reporting
19:37
about the CIA or the military or when you're Secretary of Defense or what
19:44
the Congress is doing but you always believed in not just sufficient
19:50
transparency but as much transparency in government is possible and I think you
19:57
took that's the lesson you took from Watergate is that you could it's often
20:02
easier to say no I'm not going to talk we don't have to answer that but in fact even though it's
not written down that's
20:09
your duty that means I answered his phone calls every day did you answer
20:15
them the first time or did that develop got 5,000 questions to ask you but let's
20:22
let's start because let's start with Richard Nixon in the tape that we just saw why you make
reference in your in
20:28
one of your speeches on the committee and I presume that's the speech of the day that you
announced how you were going to vote that was the day we took
20:34
the vote he took the vote right and you talked about how he was your president you believed in
him you voted for him
20:39

and such and I believe which would be that you were you either were at that point or had been a Republican yourself

20:46

I was a recovering Republican at the at

20:54

the outset of this at the outset of this investigation did you did did you folks

21:01

believe basically believe the White House believe the presidency he couldn't

21:07

have been involved or responsible for anything like this or either of you doubters from the beginning I had spent the previous six years

The Saturday Night Massacre

21:15

either prosecuting cases or defending cases and my mindset was let's look at

21:20

the facts wherever they take us let's follow the facts and so I think a

21:27

transformational moment for me was I was sitting over in Lewiston watching a hockey game and this was the night of

21:34

the Saturday night massacre maybe we need to very quickly remind people what that was

21:39

it's when Lewiston

21:44

or where is Lewis in Lewiston got him elected everybody here I think it

22:00

reminds me of the time the young the joke was there was some graffiti scribbled on a wall and it's the

22:07

question was is there intelligent life on earth and Bob get out of the car and said yes but I'm only visiting I was

22:19

watching a hockey game over in Lewiston Maine and the reporter came up and said have you heard he put a microphone in my

22:26

face and said have you heard that really really Elliot Richardson has just resigned yes as I continued general and

22:34

that Archibald Cox has been fired he was the special prosecutor yeah

22:39

possibly there's some kids though I did and I

22:45

said well that's got to be a mistake can't be true come back after the year the next period won't you see if you can

22:50

verify came back no it's true and at that moment I knew something had

22:57

really transpired I was a good friend of Elliot Richardson and a close friend and when he was when he resigned because he

23:04

would not fire Mr. Cox I knew that something was brewing that

23:10

was going to be far deeper than anything that we suspect at that time so my mindset was I don't know what the facts

23:16

are but I'm gonna find out what the facts are I'm not going to simply be a party

23:21

loyalist although it's called upon me almost every week we would gather as members of the Republican members of the

23:28

Judiciary Committee to meet with the house leader Republican leader and they

23:33

would go around the table say okay what happened this week and basically it was trying to force us to conform and stay

23:40

together as a party in fact I recall going down to the White House one time and all of us went down and President

23:47

Nixon was there and he giving a rallying speech and he got up and he said next audience here but he

23:56

said I may not be a son of a but you know that I'm your son

24:03

and all of the Republicans stood up and started cheering and it was one of those

24:08

rally around the president no matter what the facts were and I found myself it was difficult for me and impossible

24:14

for me to do that what I said look if I still believed as I saw this comment I

24:19

still believed well into the investigation that had President Nixon simply come forward and said look this

24:26

is what's happened by town over content I set this thing in motion I made a big

24:32

mistake I have acted inconsistent with my obligations we were under pressure

24:37

the threat of a war in the Middle East we have all of these tension maybe going to war and I made a big mistake I was

24:44

willing to believe that if he had done that until well into the investigation the American people would have forgiven

24:49

they would have said we disapprove of what you've done but the government would have continued and when he didn't

24:56

do that then I became convinced that there was no choice and as I listened to tape after tape after tape and I matched

25:03

it up with all of the edited transcripts and what I did was something that I think no other member the committee did

25:08

this I memorized all of the hearings that took place in the Senate Watergate investigation verbatim and they went

25:16

back and listened to all the tapes and whenever a witness came before the committee if they changed one word of

25:22

their testimony I knew in my own mind where that differentiation was a difference was and so that's how

25:29

determined I was to get to the truth into the facts regardless of whether

25:35

came out in favor of against the president bob was question was was sort

25:40

of a pivotal moment and did you at first believed that President Nixon could not be part of it no no I I thought it was

25:48

inconceivable in the the conventional wisdom in Washington was that Nixon's

25:55

too smart to be involved but in reporting the story again it's

26:02

very much the process that secretary Cohen is talking about what are the

26:07

facts what's the story and you do it incrementally and what we found from the

26:13

sources we talked to and the documents that there was a conspiratorial

26:20

clandestine funding of all the Watergate style operations and then led right into

26:26

the White House to the president's top aides to attorney former attorney

26:32

General John Mitchell and so forth and we published these stories before the

26:38

1972 election which Nixon won by a landslide and quite frankly people

26:46

didn't believe them our colleagues at the Washington Post didn't believe it and the variable for Carl Bernstein and

26:55

myself was that the editors and the owner of the Washington Post

27:01

particularly Katherine Graham who was the publisher an owner of the post at that time and I remember a moment

27:09

January 1973 and again this is Watergate is a blip we've written many stories

27:16

accusing the White House of conspiracy and Katherine Graham called me up to her

27:23

dining room at the post for lunch and I knew her but not well at all and I

27:30

remember being concerned about what what this is going to be about and walking

27:35

into her dining room and she gave me this look of what have you boys been

27:42

doing with my newspaper and somebody said you know there's not such a look

27:47

and I said if you'd been there you would have recognized the look she was

27:53

supportive but had questions and we sat down to lunch and my mind was blown away

28:01

quite frankly by the number of questions she had about Watergate in the knowledge and she had what I later described

28:10

as a management style which in many ways is perfect which is hands-on I'm sorry

28:16

hands off mind on intellectually engaged with what we're doing why we're doing it

28:22

but hands off in terms of telling editors how to edit reporters how to

28:28

report and at the end she had the the

28:33

killer question which was when are we gonna find the whole truth about

28:39

Watergate now this is before any testimony this is before any trial this

28:44

is before even the knowledge of the taping system and I said that Carl
28:51
Bernstein and I felt because it was criminal conspiracy because people in
28:56
the White House had been frightened because they compartmentalised information the answer
was never we were
29:03
never gonna know the full story I remember across the lunch table she had this pained stricken
look on her face
29:12
and she said never don't tell me never
29:19
I left that lunch a motivated employee
29:25
but it wasn't a threat imperative mrs. so long-winded but it was not a threat
29:33
it was a statement of purpose she said use your resources the
29:39
resources of this newspaper to get to the bottom of this story it is our
29:44
responsibility to do that and leave no stone unturned in that environment as a
29:53
reporter your your turn loose it is this
29:59
process find out what happened and and don't stop don't tell me never and that
30:07
atmosphere and the environment allowed us to keep working on the story lots of
30:14
people and they're right at this moment the post stock could go in public Nixon had people
attacking the
30:21
Washington Post FCC licenses of television stations so that stock was
30:27
down and a lot of owners would have said stop back off I don't want to know and
30:34
this is the case where somebody said not only do I want to know but we have to
30:42
know it's an odd question what what if the cover-up had worked
30:48
first of all how close did it come to working and what if it had worked what if this had never
been revealed what
30:55
would have happened to the country well I think you would have seen a consistent
Impeachment

31:00

pattern of abuse Bob talked about what the criminality involved there were two

31:06

major articles of impeachment one was abuse of power and the other was the the

31:14

cover-up and the the criminal activity involved in terms of obstruction of justice the payment of hush money those

31:21

activities being carried on by the president United States it's completely inconsistent with what we expect and

31:27

deserve out of a constitutional form of government so you would have had a continuation of the kinds of practices

31:33

of intimidation keeping the enemies lists using neutral instruments of

31:38

government in order to investigate or intimidate political opponents you would Bob and I talked about this in a way on

31:46

the way of the plane you know I'll yield to him because he has a whole series of cascading things that would have

31:52

happened that would not have happened but for the investigation that revealed

31:57

the the nature of the abuse and are you are you confident that that that those

32:03

sorts of abuses have not happened since no no not at all I what I what I said in

32:11

the beginning was you know all power is corrupt that's you know Lord Acton and it's true today that's one of the

32:19

reasons I think we're seeing the reaction in amongst the American people that when you have one party in charge

32:25

of everything then the potential for abuse it becomes much more real and becomes realized and

32:33

then when people feel they don't have to account to the other party to the other

32:38

institutions government to the press to the people that we're in charge we won

32:44

it's ours then you have no restraint on the power of government and that's when

32:49

you get inevitable abuse and I think we've seen an example after example in this administration as well but but the

32:57

cover-up worked for a long time it took two and a half years to finally have the day of reckoning about this and if it

33:05

had world III agree that there would have been this sense of there's no

33:10

accountability but I think the sadness would have been there there would not

33:17

have been that wonderful lesson of Watergate and the wonderful lesson of

33:22

Watergate is and almost paradoxically it

33:27

is Nixon himself who found the ultimate

33:33

lesson of Watergate in the day he resigned the presidency he may recall

33:38

went on television that day before and said I'm resigning and that the day of

33:44

his resignation in August 1974 he called

33:49

all of his cabinet senior staff the press cameras into the East Room of the

33:54

White House and he gave a speech that with no script then he talked about his

34:01

wife two daughters two brother their husbands were behind him and he was

34:07

sweating and he was saying you know talking about his mother and his father

34:13

and reading from Teddy Roosevelt's diary you know literally reading Roosevelt TRS

34:21

diary about the death of his wife which TR writes the light went out of my life

34:27

forever almost comparing the loss of the presidency with the loss of your wife

34:33

and his people commented at the time lots of people in the White House this

34:40

was a psychiatric hour for Nixon almost but then with his wonderful body

34:46

language he kind of said at the end this

34:53

is kinda this is why I called you here this is what I want you to take away and

35:01

then he said always remember others may hate you but those who hate you don't
35:09
win unless you hate them and then you destroy yourself now think about the
35:18
wisdom of that at that moment he realized that the piston driving his
35:26
presidency and him was hate and he said the poison
35:33
of hate destroys and that's that's the
35:39
big lesson of Watergate for me in your personal life and in politics and
35:45
everything that hey we'll do you in and Nixon do you have to give him credit for
35:53
identifying that at the moment the worst moment of his life perhaps where he had
35:59
to give up the presidency which he had spent all of his life trying to to
36:05
attain to and then understanding that
36:10
hate destroys and that that for me you
36:17
know that it goes it goes to your poetry I mean hate does destroy hate is the
36:23
thing that we need to get out of American politics we need to get out of our personal lives and
it's true you
36:31
hate you destroy so one quick thing an answer Bob had pointed this out to me if we had not
had
If we had not had the investigation
36:37
the investigation and Richard Nixon continued in office you would not have had a Gerald Ford if
you do not have a
36:43
Gerald Ford you unlikely would have not you would have had a Jimmy Carter if you didn't have
Jimmy Carter you wouldn't
36:49
have had a Ronald Reagan if you didn't have Ronald Reagan you wouldn't have had a President
Bush 41 and who on the other
36:55
ticket if you didn't have President Bush 41 you certainly wouldn't have President Bush 43 so a
lot would have changed you
37:02
know this is why I'm here if that speech

The relationship between the press and presidents

37:13

you would given went something like this in the morning you wake up and there's

37:20

snow on the ground you don't know whether it's snow and you can't be

37:26

absolutely sure well since you mentioned mentioned more recent presidents want to

37:33

ask a media question in particular a media expert here and I'm a media guy and can you compare certainly the media

37:40

did not like Richard Nixon a lot of the a lot of the members of the media if the press did not and a lot of members of the press don't care for George Bush can

37:48

you compare the the the atmosphere the relationship between the press and those two presidents I mean real quickly I

37:55

think liking or not liking a president should have zero to do with your

38:02

coverage I never disliked Nixon and never you know in the case of Bush I've

38:10

interviewed Bush more than any reporter and he's granted me hours of interviews

38:17

about substantive matters like deciding to go to war in Iraq and so forth I

38:24

think the problem is that they in the

38:30

white-eyed met I mean I have to give them there's something in the White House air handling system the air

38:38

conditioning system the heating system that gets people to think that they need

38:44

to that they've got the ball all the time and that there is no accountability and

38:51

that people are trying to make them accountable are somehow off-base and

38:57

that leads to this poison in this distrust and I think I've always tried

39:04

to push against it I have always gone in the in the case of Watergate we went to

39:10

the White House many times saying we want to talk to the president we want answers to these questions we want his

39:15

side of the story so I the the

39:21

difficulty is you all the opposition to a president gets lumped together there's

39:27

the other party and so then they say oh the press is asking the same question as

39:32

the other party so they're all part of the enemies and I think I think that's poisoned and in the end it will destroy

39:40

some of the the same the same feelings that you would that you refer to with

39:45

President Nixon you mean now no no with with the the hatred the so clearly read

39:54

the tapes I mean he was he was anti-semitic he was anti black if

39:59

somebody said he was anti everyone he just and venom in seeing conspiracies

40:07

and people thinking when the Labor Statistics come out about unemployment

40:12

what isn't it he doesn't like him and so Nixon asked for how many Jews are there

40:18

in the Bureau of Labor Statistics and then gets this crazy idea that there are

40:25

that the Jews are doing this to him and it is it is just an outrage but you know

40:32

there it is on the tapes secretary Cohen they just brief your thought on the media versus White House relationship

40:37

the two times then now I think it depends on what the president thinks about the press in other words if you

Media vs White House relationship

40:44

dislike the press and you distrust the press then you're going to set a an emotional relationship with the press

40:51

that's going to be more antagonistic if you respect the press know they've got a job to do and

40:57

is fourth rate as you possibly can be understanding you have things you can't say but if you treat them with respect

41:02

then you'll be treated with respect if you compare Richard Nixon and say well okay how did they treat Jerry Ford much

41:08

different even with the pardon or how do they treat President Bush 41 President

41:13

Bush 41 cont you like the press he liked dealing with him and I think he got a different brand of treatment same with with the

41:20

President Clinton as you go up through and I'd say frankly President Bush 43 the current president press members tend

41:29

to like him personally when they're dealing one-on-one with him very engaging I don't see them beating up on

41:35

him with the kind of animus that that might have been directed toward Richard Nixon that'd be the priming up now

41:42

because of what has happened and because of the same traits that were evident

41:47

back during the Watergate in terms of holding circling the wagons not being forthcoming seeing the enemy all around

41:55

and and and buttoning down I think those are the reasons why you're seeing the the press change at this moment but I

42:02

think that he's had a up to this most recent point to pretty good relations with the president could a cover-up like

Could a coverup like Watergate happen

42:09

Watergate happen in that now in the age of bloggers and the and the internet and

42:14

all that we saw the the thing with CBS and the during the the last presidential election and there a report there

42:22

documents about President Bush that bloggers in the internet blew up could it could that sort of cover-up happened

42:28

today well you had four or five years basically where you had pretty much

42:35

stonewalling and dealing with the war in terms of what was going on what was being said what were the what was the

42:41

reality what were the memos that were being given to the president what was the intelligence being given to the

42:47

president what was the reporting being given from the White House to the American people it can only go on so

42:52

long it ultimately the facts will come out just a question of how long it takes

42:58

my concern with what is taking place today with the democratization of information is that there's no filter

43:05

left any longer at least if you're talking in the Washington Post and the time's the major networks usually they

43:12

have seasons people in charge of looking at the information making assessments in

43:19

deciding what is fit to print what is not I think today we have no filter

43:25

eventually what will happen as you look in the blogosphere the people will come

43:30

to say well that one's okay these two are okay and that one don't don't trust it so there'll be this kind of

43:36

correction the self correction mechanism where because of the proliferation of the blog's people will come to say only

43:44

these are trustworthy because the people who are doing the reporting or the investigating have established a

43:49

reputation but I think it's just it's going to be more difficult to have any kind of a cover-up in the future do you

The importance of slow and patient reporting

43:55

agree with that well first of all I don't think the blog's are gonna uncover a cover-up that's done by detailed

44:04

persistent well-thought-out reporting and I don't think there's a whole lot of that in the blogosphere the the

44:12

difficulty is the the two driving forces

44:18

in the media today are speed and impatience give it to us fast and I want

44:25

it now no no well good reporting to understand

44:31

what's going on involved slow and patient the exact opposite I'm not

44:38

worried about the blog's or the cable channels and you know some of it's very

44:44

good and informative but it creates a sense in a newsroom if you have an

44:52

incremental advance on a story and my

44:58

impulse then is to take it and go do a book that it will come out 18 months or

45:04

two years later particularly if it's important the the spirit of the times in

45:12

the newsroom oh you've got something can we get it on the website by noon

45:17

well if you get everything on the website by noon you don't get to the truth

45:22

you don't really dig into it and it is it is a process that takes weeks and

45:29

months I think in the news media what we have to do is convince people we have a

45:35

product that is valuable and you demonstrate that by doing it by telling

45:42

people that you know in the old newspaper of the world they used to call it a bacon cooler you

know the bacon

45:49

cool no is it is it near lowest of

46:01

Aitkin cooler is a story that is in the newspaper that's so good that somebody

46:06

is reading it and they get the bacon on the pork and they they don't even want

46:11

to interrupt to put it in their mouth and so the bacon cools on the floor now

46:17

there are not many bacon coolers and my business but that's what you aspire to

46:23

and if we are able to do it more and more in a in a persuasive way it's like

46:29

any product it's like a good car or a good razor blade it will prevail in the

46:35

marketplace if it's better and that those of us who work for newspapers and

46:42

traditional organizations just need to get our Ben Bradlee always said the way

46:47

to get a story is nose down ass up moving slowly forward did he teach that

46:57

in journalism school pretty good advice speaking of which we want to go we've

47:03

got some questions that been prepared by some members of the the journalism program here
at the University of Maine

47:10

we're going to go to a couple of those now we'll get back to a few other questions later I think we're joined by Samantha deploy Warren where's Samantha

47:17

right there hi Samantha and thanks for joining us I think you have a microphone and you've got some questions that that

47:24

that members of the journalism program have prepared many questions some of

47:30

which you've already answered I'm sure you've thought about this countless times but what do you wish you had done

47:35

when you were working the Watergate story that sorry well I'd be the question was what would you wish you

47:42

done differently while working the story working the Watergate story I wish we'd been smarter I wish we'd been faster it

47:49

took us a long time to put it together we made some mistakes when we wrote the

47:55

account in the book all the President's Men it we identified our mistakes and

48:02

things that we did we realized one of the lessons of Watergate is let it no modified limited hang out but let it

48:09

hang out fully but their flaws in something like that and I could I could

48:18

stay keep you here all afternoon but but Carl and I got a document at one point

48:25

and realized that Howard hunt and Gordon Liddy who were the two kind of operation Chiefs of the Watergate operation had

48:32

gone to Los Angeles and spent time at the Beverly Wilshire hotel and and we

48:39

had the dates and we had some information we flew to Los Angeles and you know what were they doing here what

48:46

were they doing here well we didn't find out what they were doing here we spent a lot of Mrs. Graham's money and came up

48:53

dry and it turns out that's when they've gone to burglarize the psychiatrist's

49:01

office to Daniel Ellsberg who would leaked the Pentagon Papers and I've said

49:06

to myself I didn't we know and we could have put things together and we failed

49:12

many one of many examples bill do you have any anything on that no I did

49:19

everything perfectly except your haircut

49:24

at that time who was your barber did you employed

49:31

Louis's what but after did you did you or other

After the vote

49:37

members of the committee after that was over but say we should have caught this sooner we should have done this we

49:43

should end that I'll tell you what happened following the the vote short

49:49

time thereafter there was a priest who was with Rensselaer in Indiana who came

49:54

to Washington said that he wanted to create an oral history of the sekolah

50:00

Shand the fragile coalition what were the thoughts going through our minds as we were reaching a conclusion and we sat

50:08

around for a weekend on Hilton Head around a tape recorder and we sat and

50:14

had seven of seven seven congressmen and we sat around a table drinking libations

50:24

having a great old time talking about what influenced us at the moment and frankly everybody came to a conclusion

50:31

at a different point in time there was there was only one meeting in which the

50:36

seven got together it was the day before the hearings went public and that was a meeting it was held at Tom Railsback

50:42

Sophos when he called up and said would you like to come over tomorrow morning we're having a few of us get together to

50:48

see how this thing all shapes up and I was telling Bob on the way up here this morning that I had no idea who was gonna

50:55

be in that room I thought I felt pretty lonely frankly during the course of the the investigation or the committee's

51:01

investigation I felt that I was perhaps the only member who was out there only

51:07

Republican who was going to vote to recommend the impeachment yes and I'll

51:12

tell you what it was going on behind closed doors I had become so familiar

51:17

with the facts all of the tapes all of the edited transcripts I had spent I spent days

51:23

literally with earphones over my head listening to every nuance of what was

51:28

being said in the Oval Office and frequently behind closed doors we each had five minutes to

51:35

interrogate witnesses and frequently the Democratic members would yield their

51:40

time to me which made it very uncomfortable I can tell you the Republicans looking at me and Democrats

51:46

yielding me the time if they had one question that was the one question they say I yield the balance of my time to

51:51

congressman Cohen well it made it pretty uncomfortable but I felt okay I've got

51:57

five more minutes and I can do the the investigation so I felt I was pretty much out there alone and I didn't know

52:03

whether it be anybody else that would agree that this was an abuse of power or an obstruction of justice and when I

52:09

walked into that room congressman rails backs office that morning was the first time that any of

52:15

us had gotten together as Railsback Caldwell Butler from Virginia Hamilton

52:20

fish from New York Tom man from South Carolina Walter flowers from Alabama's

52:26

and no two Democrats he's gonna do Democrats and and that was the first time and they said let's throw

52:32

everything up in the air and see how this all shakes down is there anything we can agree on and we all sat there and

52:38

said well I think the following and they said we agree and so then we went into

52:44

the public hearing and we got hit with a hammer Charlie Sandman that name rings a bell to you congressman from New Jersey said

52:51

how our vague this was it was unconstitutionally vague to simply allege an abuse of power or an

52:59

obstruction of justice where was the quote specificity that was a word that kept being used during the course of the

53:05

hearings so we got hammered that first day were the press covering us and here we were offering articles of impeachment

53:11

and Charlie salmon and others were simply taking us to the relief to the

53:17

cleaners so to speak right after that hearing we got together said okay Cohen you draft you give all the specifics of

53:23

the abuse of process of power or the obstruction of justice and someone so you do this article so I

53:30

went back and made the case for that particular article we came out the next day but that's how it's how tenuous it

53:38

was at that moment we were on our heels after that first day of open hearings because we hadn't done enough of the

53:44

homework to put every specific Gattien that would support an article dealing with abuse of power or

53:51

obstruction of justice you can go back to Samantha for that you've got a couple more questions man sure you've certainly

Other stories

53:56

gained the most attention for your coverage of Watergate but what other stories have you covered that you're particularly proud of that maybe didn't

54:03

captivate the nation as much you know I

54:09

I like your first question better [Laughter]

54:14

because it goes right it at the heart of the way I look at all of this and that

54:19

is what we miss what we don't make sense out of what we don't get to fast enough and there's nothing I've done where I

54:27

wouldn't if given a do-over with knowledge do it faster and and hopefully

54:35

better which gets to the point of what is journalism and journalism is a

54:41

snapshot a look at something at a certain moment sometimes it's right

54:47

sometimes it's it looks into the future with great wisdom and sometimes it's just dead wrong and you have to accept

54:56

that but you're one of the things I found doing that for 37 years is it is a

55:04

very cerebral process it's not just going and saying oh you know cover this

55:09

story just start calling people at random you know you really have to think about how you're approaching this story

55:16

the sequence of how you want to interview people the sequence of going

55:21

back to people the sequence of questioning in an interview how much

55:28

time you're going to get going at times of the day or at night when you can get

55:34

people for hours I don't like to I mean I I can remember coming and having lunch

55:40

with you and we would talk for hours and he wouldn't say a damn thing

55:46

but you know sometime and then I'd go back and say that was a wasted dollar 50

55:52

for a tuna fish saying let me tell you about his technique though

Columbo

55:57

I mean it is unique who was the character on television he used to go

56:02

around the the old raincoat Columbo Columbo this is Columbo incorporated he would

56:09

come and he said bill I don't understand this can you can you explain this

56:15

because I'm confused and you say oh let me tell you how this all works but he always pretends he doesn't know what's

56:21

going on and basically he knows there was not an enemy

56:27

basically he knows everything that's going on and he's testing you because he has more information he has more wires

56:33

going into his office than AT&T has around the country and so he already

56:39

knows basically the answers he's looking for he's testing you to say are you going to be straight with me can you

56:45

give me any additional information but he always comes in with this confused like and you just start babbling and

56:54

that's how he gets the stories it obviously works you know the big issues

Confusion

57:04

like it it's confusing the more you know

57:14

about it it's complex Watergate iran-contra the condition of the economy

57:20

global warming I mean if I were to do a book on global warming and we're to come

57:25

see anyone I would walk in and say I'm confused and it would be genuine so it's

57:34

it's not a confusion born of not having done any work it's a confusion of having

57:41

done enough work to realize that there's contrary information that there are

57:47

disputes about facts and so forth so you know they used to say if 60 minutes is

57:53

calling you know you're about to have a bad day same thing with Bob I'm confused and you

58:01

know you're about to have a bad day it'll just be delayed til the book comes down Samantha

one more please I'd be

Advice for aspiring journalists

58:07

more worried if you are calling me than what advice would you give to aspiring

58:12

journalists you know I there's let me give an example there's

58:21

this I'm gonna cut this real short but and that is and it's gonna be an example

58:27

with an anecdote I went to work for the Washington Post in 1971 and before

58:35

Watergate I was doing a series of stories of how restaurants in Washington

58:42

who had health inspections and they were failing the health inspections in a

58:48

serious way and they were closing the restaurants including Ben Bradley's favorite French restaurant in Washington

58:56

and I had a source in the DC Health Department who would give me these documents and so one morning he called

59:02

me and said the mayflower coffee shop has just been closed down it has the

59:09

worst score in the history of sanitation inspections in the District of Columbia

59:15

come on over and get it so I got the report and in the newspaper business you

59:20

like the early copy to get something in early so I wrote out the story that mayflower coffee shop in the Mayflower

59:27

Hotel had the worst inspection in the history and they've you know I don't

59:32

even want to repeat there were rat droppings floating in the soup and all kinds of things and I wrote this out I

59:38

gave it to this city editor and said wow that's a hell of a story front-page story have you been there and I said no

59:48

and he said well let's see it's two and a half blocks away get your ass out of

59:55

the cheers and get over to the Mayflower Hotel okay you know a picky editor so I go to the

1:00:06

Mayflower Hotel and say where's the coffee shop we don't have one you don't have one no

1:00:14

we have John Louie and we have a buffet no Mayflower coffee shop hmm so I get

1:00:22

the document I looked and there's Mayflower coffee shop in the different address turns out for reasons which I'll

1:00:30

never understand fully the Mayflower coffee shop was in the Statler Hilton Hotel which was a half a block away from

1:00:39

the Washington I went over to the Statler Hilton found the Mayflower coffee shop it was closed they had a

1:00:45

sign up closed for remodeling and got them to acknowledge they had this inspection comments and then went back

1:00:52

to the city editor and said could I have my copy back I have a few small changes

1:00:59

I'd like to make now the lesson the

1:01:05

lesson seared into my brain don't assume

1:01:12

go to the scene you're never there's no such thing as early copy get out there and check and

1:01:21

check and check and yeah I mean that really happened what the advice to

1:01:29

journalists is take that story I mean I I came back from that experience I was

1:01:36

trembling I realized that if that story had been published on the front page we

1:01:42

would have had to run a front page correction and you and I would have never met

1:01:51

want to go to want to go to summer that's in the Russia Samantha thank you very much and I'm sure you will always

1:01:58

go and visit the coffee shop before you write that story I like to go to some of you for a few of your questions and in

1:02:05

the time that we have remaining we've got some folks out there with microphones up in the aisle and raise

1:02:11

your hand and we'll find a few people with some questions I think we have somebody right over here and could you please tell us your name my name is

1:02:17

Michael Palmer I'm a professor of political science here for the last 25 years my areas political theory secretary

1:02:26

Cohen mentioned the pardon I would like to hear from both of you what did you

1:02:31

think at the time of for its pardon of Nixon or did you think he should have faced criminal charges and what do you

1:02:40

think in retrospect about the pardon or do you think he should have faced criminal charges thank you at the time I

1:02:46

didn't agree with it at the time I was caught up in the in the emotion of

1:02:52

having gone through four well seven eight months of intensive investigation

1:02:57

and then barring all of what I thought were the the burdens of taking that

1:03:04

position and simply having a complaint or an indictment which had to be go

1:03:09

before the House of Representatives first and then I assumed it would pass and then go to a trial in the Senate I

1:03:15

said this is the best way to really establish for the American people the the truth of what we have alleged but in

1:03:24

retrospect he did the right thing I think looking back over it had we

1:03:29

insisted that go forward and that he not grant the pardon and I think it would

1:03:34

have been a different a different mood different different outcome I think Jerry Ford made a very courageous

1:03:40

decision whatever his motivation was I think they were the right motivations although I think you maybe have reported

1:03:49

on this he's had some recollection there were some reports coming out now the Gerald Ford in his quiet moments may

1:03:55

have had some second thoughts about the wisdom of having granted but nonetheless I think it was the right

1:04:01

thing to do but I only came to that conclusion years later real quickly the pardon Ford

1:04:09

went on television in September 1974 about a month after becoming president

1:04:15

announce the pardon it was early Sunday morning I think he did that because he was hoping no one

1:04:21

would notice and it was noticed and I was asleep in a hotel room in New York

1:04:28

and my colleague Carl Bernstein called me with alarm in this voice and he said

1:04:34

have you heard what happened well I hadn't heard anything I've been asleep and Carl who then and still as the

1:04:43

ability to save what happened in the fewest words with the most drama said

1:04:49

the following the son-of-a-bitch pardoned the son of the [Laughter]

1:05:03

even I realized what had happened at

1:05:08

that moment and for a long time I thought that it was dirtied that there
1:05:13
was a deal that 40 people went to jail because of Watergate and the guy at the
1:05:19
top gets off 25 years later I undertook
1:05:24
a book called shadow but Watergate legacy of Watergate in five presidents
1:05:30
Ford Carter Reagan Bush Senior and Clinton and I called Jerry Ford up and
1:05:37
said I'm working on this so this is 1997 ten years ago and and I have not met or
1:05:45
interviewed for it and he said yeah come on we'll talk so I interviewed him for
1:05:52
hours and hours in New York in his place in Aspen that is placing in California
1:05:58
looked at all the memoirs went to the Ford library got the lawyer's documents
1:06:05
interviewed everyone who was still alive and Ford told me he had been offered a
1:06:13
deal but maintained he rejected it and he made a compelling argument about why
1:06:21
the pardon was necessary namely he wanted to have his own presidency the
1:06:27
country needed to get over Watergate if Nixon was indicted tribe even went to
1:06:33
jail we'd have two or three more years of Watergate he had information that
1:06:38
Nixon might take his own life or harm himself he was in such despair and so we did this and I
wrote this out the first
1:06:45
three chapters of Chateau and Caroline Kennedy the daughter of the late
1:06:52
President Kennedy called me up said I read this and we were gonna give Gerald
1:06:59
Ford the Profiles in Courage Award at the Kennedy Library and then they called
1:07:07
Ford and there was Teddy Kennedy who denounced the pardon as much as
1:07:12
he was vocally suspicious as you and I were saying Gerald Ford did a courageous
1:07:19
thing the the importance of that is not just in that one event but the lesson of
1:07:27

at a certain point in history it looks a certain way and you're absolutely sure and then time goes on and there are more

1:07:36

facts that emerge there's more kind of cool analysis and you realize that you

1:07:42

had it absolutely wrong that's another thing seared into my brain about the

1:07:48

business don't jump to overall conclusions because there may be other

1:07:55

conclusions that are even fact better supported question over here where's

1:08:05

that I did tell Ford that story about Carl's call and he laughed and laughed

1:08:15

and I and I said that I've revised my opinion of you but not the other okay I

1:08:27

Joe and Daphne I'm wondering if you could ruminate on what the benefits to

1:08:34

our country might be if the current president were impeached or would it be

1:08:41

better for our country if accountability came some other way thank you this all yours

1:08:53

I think the danger in this country is that the word impeachment is invoked too

1:09:00

often I was talking again to Bob on the way up on this morning and I remember

1:09:07

quoting from Lord Chancellor Summers during the Watergate hearings and I

1:09:13

remember that vividly when I went back to look into English history because we didn't really know much about

1:09:19

impeachment it had been only one impeachment trial in our history and that was with Andrew Johnson nearly a

1:09:24

hundred years before more than her years before the Watergate and which a

1:09:30

prominent member of the the main delegation William Pitt Fessenden played a serious role in that impeachment

1:09:37

debate but Chancellor summers said that impeachment was like Goliath sword to be

1:09:44

removed from the temple on great occasions only and whenever you're going

1:09:50

to reverse the public's will you're going to have had two elections now the public has voted for the for President

1:09:57

Bush to pull out impeachment say we don't like what he has done we don't like what he has said well we think that

1:10:04

he has lied to us he has take us into a war that not only unpopular but seemingly endless the the end of that is

1:10:13

or the the accountability is that ultimately you will judge him you will judge the party the people who supported

1:10:20

whatever policy he is advocated so there's always going to be accountability ultimately politically

1:10:26

within four years or eight years but I think that by turning to impeachment say we don't trust him anymore or we don't

1:10:35

like him anymore we think that he has misled us or he has abused his power you have to make a

1:10:41

compelling case and that should be overwhelming before you remove the sword

1:10:46

from the temple for the from the scabbard and it seems to me that there I

1:10:52

have not seen that kind of evidence that would warrant that if you had absolute

1:10:57

evidence of criminality as opposed to a political position or a sense that

1:11:05

he's in charge and he has these expansive executive powers he hasn't had

1:11:10

to be accountable to the the Congress he doesn't have to get court permission to wiretap all of those issues are now

1:11:16

being debated and frankly Congress in my judgment has abdicated its responsibilities and had you had a much

1:11:24

more Congress much more engaged much more demanding much less willing to be

1:11:31

caught up in the emotion of the moment saying well at the time of war and therefore we give it all away then you

1:11:38

wouldn't be arguing or even suggesting impeachment at this point again in the absence of criminality and you don't

1:11:44

have to commit a crime in order to be impeached I argued that point myself basically you can have an abuse of power

1:11:51

without necessarily committing a crime but nonetheless I think in this

1:11:56

particular case we're much better to do what's going on right now to have this debate the presidential campaign is

1:12:03

certainly focused upon this issue the Democrats will make Iraq the major issue of next year Republicans will be held

1:12:10

accountable those who have supported the president without any qualification will

1:12:16

have a much more difficult time during the the elections so I think there are enough checks and balances you can get

1:12:23

away with that abuse of power for four years potentially eight years beyond

1:12:28

that the system has a way of correcting itself and I think that's what's taking place in terms of the press now being

1:12:35

much more aggressive than it was the first four years much more challenging much more skeptical and that's the way

1:12:41

it should be I mean we should always want to have a press that is questioning

1:12:46

its skeptical of statements coming out of government someone once said seek the truth and the

1:12:53

truth will set you free but it's going to make you very uncomfortable in the process it's maybe

1:12:58

very painful in the process that's what happened during Watergate we went after the truth it set us free

1:13:04

in the sense we're back to this balance of power between the checks and balances

1:13:09

of our institutions and that's the way democracies ought to function and not

1:13:15

simply as a monarchy like I've been real real quickly the dirty little secret in

1:13:21

the war if you go back to the decision to go to war yes it was Bush's decision

1:13:27

he can employ the force the US military as he sees fit as commander-in-chief I

1:13:35

was making this point to a very large group a couple of weeks ago and that

1:13:40

people are saying wait a minute the Congress has to declare war and so forth not so and I wasn't getting through and

1:13:48

I said look the president can invade Mexico tomorrow if he chooses and

1:13:55

somebody stood up in the back and shouted don't give him any ideas but he

1:14:05

can and the Congress voted three to one

1:14:10

before the war giving him a blank check to go to war the climate of opinion at

1:14:18

the time was you thought the war was reasonable no no I thought it was

1:14:23

reasonable to say did we in the Clinton administration myself included believed

1:14:30

that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction and the answer was it was

1:14:35

reasonable to believe that because it was based upon a reasonable assumption he had had them he had used them he had

1:14:42

refused you account for those the war did you I did not side I did not support going forward what I did you know what I

1:14:49

here's the you can tell you know this takes there's lots of movement in the cheer

1:14:58

well I want to be perfectly clear to someone who really reserve judgment and not reaching any conclusions

1:15:05

you know we in the Clinton administration I'm AG on this because I've tried not to be critical of a

1:15:13

decision maker since I wasn't there at the time I can only tell you what I saw and what I saw at the time that I was in

1:15:19

office is that Saddam Hussein we assumed he had weapons of mass destruction we did not

1:15:24

think he posed an imminent threat to the United States or to anyone in the region because we thought he hadn't reasonably

1:15:30

well contained no-fly zones the north no-fly zones in the south we were decimating his air defense system so we

1:15:37

assumed he had weapons of mass destruction but we had no intent of going into Iraq unless we had to unless

1:15:45

he invaded Kuwait Saudi Arabia or attacked Israel or unless he started taking down our airplanes then we had a

1:15:51

plan and that plan called for up to 500,000 troops to go in so we didn't see the necessity and frankly I didn't see

1:15:59

the nurse at the imperative necessity to go in because he posed an immediate or

1:16:04

imminent threat but I assumed like President Bush and everybody else in the administration he did in fact have

1:16:11

weapons of mass destruction and had I've been in favor of going in saying there

1:16:16

was an imminent threat I would have said four to five hundred thousand troops that was our plan that's why but at the

1:16:24

time the Democratic establishment look John Kerry ihlara Clinton voted to

1:16:30

authorize the war the political journalistic academic and whatever kind

1:16:37

of community basically said there were some exceptions but basically supported

1:16:43

the war and to now then come back and say oh it hasn't turned out well we're

1:16:49

going to impeach is probably not a

1:16:54

remedy that's gonna get very far because too many people were in on it quite frankly and too many people who were in

1:17:01

on it trying to say oh no you know I wasn't in on it well people were in on

1:17:06

it and you know and and a little a nice a nice little promotion for the talk

1:17:12

that's coming tonight that will that will touch much more detail on the Iraq matters let's see if we with we can get

1:17:18

one more question from RT and so do we have over on this side mr. microphone

1:17:25

mr. Woodward Nathan storm right teacher you said earlier that the best product

1:17:33

will win out could you revisit that in light of the fact that some voices get an extensive amount of time and

1:17:39

space and others give very little and frequently the ones with lots of space do sloppy sloppy work how is it that

1:17:45

better product in that environment what what should or can be done about the fact that we get a lot of information

1:17:51

which is fairly poorly vetted or frankly highly misleading well it is but the job

1:17:58

of the journalist to sift through that and just because somebody seems a little

1:18:04

on the marg and doesn't mean they're wrong and it's the journalists job to figure that out I mean just to get into

1:18:10

the complete hairshirt on iraq I wrote a story before the Iraq

1:18:17

war on the front page of The Washington Post saying there is no smoking gun

1:18:22

intelligence that Saddam Hussein his weapons of mass destruction

1:18:27

I had three sources who told me that the evidence about WMD in Iraq was much

1:18:35

skimpier than they were saying and I did not pursue that aggressively enough I

1:18:42

should have known from the experience that you and I from myself as a journalist and you as a congressman that

1:18:49

the standard always in journalism law

1:18:55

impeachment is smoking gun intelligence good high quality provable intelligence

1:19:01

and I should have known when people were telling me that and wrote that there was

1:19:07

no smoking gun intelligence that there's something wrong here that the proclamations of he has WMD and

1:19:14

worrying about the mushroom cloud on the horizon and so forth was a grotesque

1:19:20

overstatement I was not aggressive enough at all in doing that and again

1:19:28

another even at age 64 you learn lessons to give you one final comment on that

1:19:37

again we assumed he had weapons of mass destruction those of us who had we're

1:19:43

serving in public office at that time we actually attacked i had recommended

1:19:48

that we go after saddam hussein in a very discreet way as we did in desert

1:19:54

fox in which we had a three and a half four take air campaign to take out his missile in nineteen ninety eight ninety

1:20:01

were Secretary of Defense so we

1:20:11

conducted a very limited say we people think you're talking about the Republican Party we who were in office

1:20:19

at the Pentagon at that time I who was secretary defense at that moment had

1:20:25

recommended that we take out the missile production facilities based on the intelligence that we had and but it was

1:20:32

going to be very narrow very limited and for a very short duration and we were not going in on the ground but it was

1:20:38

based on intelligence and we were assured that this in fact posed a

1:20:43

significant threat to the extent that that missile facility continued to be developed and so that's when we decided

1:20:50

to go forward but once again you base it upon the information you get if you're a

1:20:57

reporter you obviously will put a higher degree of skepticism on that information

1:21:03

than perhaps we did at the time but we tried our level best say is this really good is this solid information because

1:21:10

you should never go to war or launch an attack unless you have the best possible

1:21:16

information you bill isn't the lesson there that you're you didn't decide to

1:21:21

invade with five hundred thousand and in fact that strike in desert fox was in a

1:21:28

sense a punishment strike directed at Saddam who was not permitting the UN

1:21:35

authorized weapons inspections to go ahead and so what you're doing is

1:21:41

important you need a level of evidence that's very high but you're not committing the country to a massive

1:21:48

invasion of an their country bob just made my point we

1:21:56

you know we talk about the doctrine of preemption and we're living in a time in

1:22:02

which the threats to our existence certainly substantial elements of our existence can be blown away in not

1:22:11

nanoseconds but matters of moments and so then the question becomes should you

1:22:16

be able to take pre-emptive action and the answer is yes preemption has always

1:22:22

been part of any country's power even legal authority provided you have two

1:22:29

things number one you have really good intelligence someone else is about to

1:22:35

attack you and number two that that attack is imminent it is coming it's not

1:22:42

next year it's not that he may develop nuclear weapons to the three or five years from now it is imminent because if

1:22:48

you start to lower the threshold on the doctrine of preemption then you send a signal to everybody else Pakistan India

1:22:56

we have information the other countries about to attack let's go first Iran Iran any country you're talking

1:23:04

about you better get intelligence it better be good and the threat must be imminent before you attack first so

1:23:12

that's something that I always felt very deeply about I when I was secretary

1:23:17

defense I was very reluctant to commit troops to any kind of a combat situation because I looked at the young men and

1:23:23

women who were serving us as my sons and daughters and I said these are my children and I'm not going to put them

1:23:30

in harm's way unless I absolutely have to do so and that's the way in which I approached it now is that to caution

1:23:37

caution Ares that too timid I don't think so when you and trust your son and

1:23:43

daughter to me you say mr. Cohen I want you to make sure before you put my child in harm's way you better be right or as

1:23:49

close to as you can possibly be and that's the way I approached [Applause]

1:24:02

since our kind our times just about up I wanted to steer it back to Watergate

1:24:07

one final question a personal one for both of you at the time of the break-in mister you

1:24:15

were what you were a rookie first-year reporter I believe on the Washington Post and secretary Cohen you were you

1:24:23

were not a leaving elected yet I was running for office running for office and you were 32 you were 29 have you

1:24:32

over the years ever stopped to think about the role of fate and that all

1:24:40

those events and where your lives would have led had it not been for one of you

1:24:48

maybe not I would have been the editor of the lowest and [Laughter]

1:25:01

I still would have been a member of the

1:25:06

House of Representatives but I don't think I would ever have risen above that

1:25:13

for many years I think fate has something to do with a chance that's a

1:25:19

lot to do with it I mentioned just by going to the Institute of Politics and

1:25:24

being told put the committee you want last and going to Washington and my staff saying don't go on the Judiciary

1:25:31

Committee what's wrong with you they only deal with issues that will kill you back home abortion and prayer in public school

1:25:38

that's all they do is to bait those issues that can only harm you I said no I really want to be on the judiciary can

1:25:44

they hide love alone so I put it last is that fate is that spinning there well

1:25:49

that wheel is at hand of Providence I mean it's it's that wonderful quote

1:25:54

about life must be lived forward but it can only be understood backwards and you

1:26:01

think of all of us who are in this room today where we started where we are today and you look back over your

1:26:08

shoulder and say how did I get here how did I end up in this particular place at this particular moment look at

1:26:14

all the decisions I made decisions I didn't make how much luck was involved

1:26:21

how much had to do with my parents guidance what were those momentary diversions that took me down one path and not the

1:26:27

other we all tried to at the toward the end of our lives look back and speculate

1:26:33

exactly why we did what we did and where why we're here where we are and whether

1:26:39

that's fate or Providence or simply a lot of luck I think it's probably a combination of everything or is the late

1:26:46

actor John Wayne put the other side of that issue life is tough but life is

1:26:54

tougher if you're stupid

1:27:03

I had this elegant quote about fortune favors the prepared mind but I think

1:27:09

yours is a lot Hill Cohen Bob Woodward thank you both very much for being [Applause]

1:27:26

you

The University of Maine in Orono is the flagship campus of the University of Maine System, where efforts toward racial equity are ongoing, as is the commitment to facing a complicated and not always just institutional history. The University recognizes that it is located on Marsh Island in the homeland of the Penobscot nation, where issues of water and its territorial rights, and encroachment upon sacred sites, are ongoing. Penobscot homeland is connected to the other Wabanaki Tribal Nations — the Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, and Micmac — through kinship, alliances, and diplomacy. The university also recognizes that the Penobscot Nation and the other Wabanaki Tribal Nations are distinct, sovereign, legal and political entities with their own powers of self-governance and self-determination.