

Deep Dodo

By Mark Y. Herring

Deep Truth: The Lives of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, by Adrian Havill (New York: Birch Lane Press, 1993) 264 pages, 3 appendixes, bibliography, index.

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The only fear Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein had after the publication of *All the President's Men* (and the subsequent movie, starring Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman) was that a reporter as tenacious as they would turn his gaze upon them. They have met that fear and it is Adrian Havill. *Deep Truth* reads like Nixon's revenge. At long last, we see that hypocrisy is not limited to those who shout greed at the eighties only to have made tens of thousands of dollars themselves. It also extends to those who shouted “Crook, crook!”, while misrepresenting, cheating and stealing their way to the top.

Havill's biography is a warts and tell-it-all screed. The only problem is, once read, one is hard-pressed to remember anything other than the warts. This isn't like reading *Unsafe at Any Speed*, only to discover that Ralph Nader owned stock in a competing car firm. This is like awarding Janet Cooke the Pulitzer Prize, only to discover it was for fiction, not news reporting—Hey, wait a minute—but more on that later.

How Bob and Carl got to Watergate is incredible. Bob grew up in rigid, evangelical Wheaton, Illinois, but it may as well have been Alcatraz, or so it seemed to him. After he found out his mother had an affair with a neighbor, Bob began withdrawing. But the Soviet launching of *Sputnik* seemed to have an even deeper impact: Bob began questioning adults. “What's the real issue there?” Bob liked to ask his elders. No doubt his elders loved to reply.

Though many of his classmates remember Bob as stuck-up, Bob was merely an intellectual *and* a Goldwater Republican, or so sounded his class president speeches. But his election as sophomore class president could not be replicated. One classmate remembered him as aloof, “like Nixon”. Ouch. So, Bob left Wheaton and went to Yale, courtesy of an ROTC scholarship.

Carl, on the other hand, was born to Marxist parents who cringed when Carl wanted to be

with the 'in' crowd. Carl played guitar on *The Pick Temple Show* at age nine. On one show, he played to two girls by the name of Julie and Tricia...Nixon. Yeow! God has a delicious, even joyous sense of humor. As Carl grew older, he put his energy into playing pool and drinking beer. Later, Carl became the "Dance Fever" king of his neighborhood, hair and all. But he was more the Mickey Rooney version, not John Travolta.

None of this made him the BMOC he strived to be. He was shorter than most of his peers, flunked school and so became a summer school regular. On top of all this, he developed a rather severe case of acne. In between his mother and father's traitorous Communist behavior, they worried whether Carl would amount to anything. When he asked to be bar mitzvahed, the fellow-travellers nearly died. But it only gets better. After this, Carl asked Mr. and Mrs. Lenin to join the country club. They refused.

Carl joined Aleph Zadik Aleph (AZA) instead, a youth division of the B'nai B'rith league. He wrote in his biography, *Loyalties*, how in Greensboro, North Carolina when the train they were riding broke down, he and hundreds of AZA boys and girls were subjected to the local gendarmes for entering the black section of the restaurant. Carl refused to leave, even if it meant arrest. So did the other boys and girls. When they were finally let go, the B'nai B'rith dragged him before his adult leaders and reprimanded him. The story is instructive. Havill could find no one who could corroborate this story after interviewing literally scores of the people involved. Readers need to bear this method of historical fictionalization in mind as we consider the authors' *tour de force*, *All the President's Men*.

Bob made his way at Yale, working on the *Yale Banner*. He was a moody young man, not to mention angry, and forever coming up with profundities like, "Thought is lonely". Bob also began writing novels, but idiot editors missed his genius. Bob made his own big break. After a stint with the Pentagon (though it is unclear whether he ever worked for the CIA), Bob wrote editor Rosenberg of the *Washington Post* and asked for a job. He asked for a job without salary until he proved himself. Rosenberg could hardly believe it: a Yale graduate, history and English major, who had served honorably in the U.S. Navy asking for a job without pay?

Bob got a two week trial that lasted for three, but he failed. His news sense was good but his newspaper writing stilted. Rosenberg bumped him to the *Post's* farm club by recommending him to a paper in Rockville, Maryland, circulation 35,000. Bob used this job to petition Rosenberg for a *Post* position, sending him clippings and calling him at home. After a year's worth of stories of dubious merit (including one for which he and his paper were sued for \$356,000, a decision later overturned), Bob got his job. Persistence paid off. That hideous upbringing in Wheaton, Illinois with its Calvinistic overtones, paid off. He was rewarded with a \$13,000 a year job.

Carl meanwhile got a job at *Washington's Evening Star* through his father's influence. He began as a copy boy, and what a memorable beginning it was! His first day on the job found him in a white suit. The papers' veterans sent him to the restroom to wash out the carbon paper, which task Carl dutifully performed. The veterans were later reprimanded

when the *wunderkind* Carl was found at the lavatory by the paper's editor, covered from head to foot in ink. Nevertheless, Carl had found his home.

With no formal training, Carl developed into a good reporter, using every available opportunity to get a story. He tried to get formal training, several times. He enrolled at the University of Maryland and was conditionally accepted, owing to his abysmally poor high school grades. But his reporter's job came first and he rarely attended class. He flunked out the second semester. He tried this several times before finally giving up. His big break came with a piece on 9 November 1965—the New York City blackout. Roaming the city on motorcycles and in cabs, Carl made notes for an eyewitness, Jack Kerouac style, 5,000-word story about the long night:

Then Boom! Brighter than a thousand suns! A billion-zillion-trillion candlepower. Dazzling, blazing, burning, positively blazing! Magnificent, splendiferous, overpowering, glittering, gleaming, flashing, brilliant!

This Whitman-Ginsbergesque (though some may have thought it thesaurus-ridden) won Carl the New Jersey Press Association Award for best news writing under a deadline. With the award and his clippings, Carl landed his job with the *Washington Post*. Never mind that his details about specific items - fifteen people; ten counts of _____ - were always suspect. As one editor put it, “With Carl, you could never be sure about the details.”

What brought Carl and Bob together was, of course, Watergate. When the story broke on 17 June 1972, the paper's editor Ben Bradlee called Bob in to help on the story. Carl was already there making phone calls. Bob's connections in government paid off handsomely as he was able to get in where others could not even get phone calls returned. The story blazed upon the front page, but then died down. It wasn't until Bernstein found Kenneth Dalhberg's \$25,000 donation to CREEP (Committee to Re-Elect the President) in the hands of one of the burglars, that the dam at Watergate broke.

Once the story unfolded, Deep Throat emerged and Carl and Bob, or Woodstein as they later came to be known, became famous. Havill records the posturings of both men and these truly sicken. The illegalities with which the information was secured, the egomaniacal behavior of the two men as the story continued, and the outright lies that emerged as a consequence of the reporters playing fast with the truth, boggle the mind. Both Bob and Carl made a small fortune from the book and the movie. In fact, they made a large fortune if one throws in the added bonus of being known as “the Watergate reporters”. But what happened after Watergate is as fascinating as what went before.

Bob married, three times, and continued to write a number of books: *The Commanders*, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA: 1981-1987*, *Wired*, *The Brethren* (with Scott Armstrong), and *The Man Who Would Be President: Dan Quayle* (with David Broder). He also wrote *Final Days* with Carl Bernstein. Nearly every one of these books has been surrounded by controversy, probably helping to explain why Woodward can command

six or seven figure advances. But the controversy doesn't always work. In the case of *Wired*, for example, a biography of John Belushi, Woodward first endeared himself to Belushi's wife, Judy, to extract his story and then turned on her. For some inexplicable reason, the movie version with the same title has a character playing Bob Woodward as chronicler of John Belushi's life, rather like having Charlton Heston take notes on Moses during a *Ten Commandments* remake. The book and the movie failed miserably.

Carl Bernstein moved from love affair to love affair, barely finished his part of the *Final Days* writing, and has spent most of his time on the cover of publications like *People* and *Star*. His marriage and subsequent divorce to writer Nora Ephron proved most colorful to outsiders, most embarrassing to Carl. Her novel *Heartburn* was about their life together. It also describes Carl's dyspeptic condition once it appeared. It is, as Havill writes, "as close to a carbon copy of Carl and Nora's life together as a book could have been and still escape litigation". Nora describes the Carl character (called Mark) as a "man capable of having sex with a Venetian blind". Carl would later joke about this in interviews, but clearly the description stung.

Carl also ended up with arrests by the police for drunk driving and has managed to make a general nuisance of himself wherever he's been. He made a comeback with his book *Loyalties*, 1986, a kind of autobiography for which Simon and Schuster were said to have paid \$900,000. The book received a favorable review in one important source, but damning faint praise in others. It remaindered quickly.

Bob's most embarrassing claim to fame since Watergate was his stint as the *Washington Post's* Metro assistant managing editor, a position he viewed as a stepping stone to Ben Bradlee's seat. By then Bob needed two "operating" rooms: one in which to type, the other in which to store his gigantic ego. His managerial skills were heinous, and his person skills, execrable. For example, he would often bring in sacks of Baskin & Robbins ice-cream, set them on an unattended desk, and then walk away without so much as a word. Hey, Bob, did you remember the straws?

But apart from these minor objections, Bob has a nose for personnel—a nose estopped with congestion, that is. Bob was forever looking to write himself, or have his reporters find, what he told them were "holy sh** stories". It didn't matter how well these stories had been researched, only that they evoked the expletive-deleted astonishment.

One such story came across his desk from the pen of a fairly inexperienced reporter. The story involved drug use in Washington and was filled with descriptions of the underbelly of the drug world. What really caught Bob's eye was a description of a young addict and his heroine-ridden world. The young addict was but eight years old. This was the story Bob had been looking for. Bob and Ben Bradlee both read and passed on the story. It would shake the world. Watergate II: The Drug Adventure!

This story was, of course, Janet Cooke's "Jimmy's World" for which she won, and later had to return, the Pulitzer Prize. What chagrined so was that Bob had been warned about

the story, failed to check all the sources, and in general did not do what an editor is supposed to do when such a controversial story appears. He had found his “holy sh**” story all right, it just turned out to have more of the bull variety in it. When the dust settled, Bob was demoted, Janet Cooke laughed out of newspaper writing, and the *Post* had a shiner that could be seen from Europe. The paper that Bob had made famous, he now had made infamous. This may have led to Bob's refocusing on novels and stories of various types. It surely didn't help his career as newspaper man. But no one should fret. Bob's net worth is valued at about \$8 million.

Deep Truth helps to remind us that “there are none righteous, no not one”, no matter what they tell us. While Bob and Carl gloated over the downfall of President Nixon, arguably one of the greatest president to have served in the last ninety years, their personal history is anything but pure. Here are two stars whose bright exhalation in the seventies has been sooted with the ashes that are the sin of private lives.