



**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

# All the President's Men

## A contemporary review

A reputation as one of the most faithful and artful of movie adaptations has preceded *All the President's Men* to the screen. Beginning with Robert Redford's acquaintance with Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, and with their investigative reporting on Watergate for the *Washington Post* (long before publication of their book), through constant script changes and consultation with the reporters and the *Post's* editors during production, and a painstaking studio reconstruction of the paper's large and dazzlingly lit press room (with quantities of authentic *Post* waste paper shipped West to complete the picture), the film seems to have emerged as a remarkably pure distillation of the original. It touches on all the essential moves and revelations of the investigation, while allowing itself hardly any of the usual embellishments – a bit of comedy with an obstructive secretary is the most obvious.

But in dealing with so complex (and recent) a political phenomenon as Watergate, the film perhaps best shows its mettle by compiling its evidence with all the clipped allusiveness and atmospheric tension of classic mystery fiction. Having broken down *Klute* and *The Parallax View* into a succession of almost self-contained episodes, each striking with some unexpected shock against what had gone before, Alan Pakula seems to have found the documentary equivalent for *All the President's Men*. Such crisp dramatic counterpoint is part and parcel of the way he persistently restricts his canvas. The dark, cluttered spaces that enclosed the characters in the previous two films directly suggested their blinkered awareness. Here it is quite literally visualised in a flurry of early scenes, in which the reporters are tied to their office phones as they attempt to build a story on the arrest of the five men caught breaking into National Democratic Headquarters in the Watergate building on 17 June 1972.

Simply but effectively, the film boxes the audience into the same closed perspective, forcing them, along with the reporters, to batten excitedly on each new clue that can be picked from the jumble of disembodied voices. With Gordon Willis' tight but fluid camerawork, and the controlled edginess of the performances, Pakula closes in compulsively on a step-by-step progress through the maze, as Woodward (Robert Redford) and Bernstein (Dustin Hoffman) track the burglars to White House consultants Howard Hunt and Charles Colson and, by way of a brief detour through the burglars' base in Miami, trace their financial backing to the Committee for the Re-Election of the President, and up through its echelons from Finance Chairman Maurice Stans to Campaign Director and ex-Attorney General John Mitchell. (On the other hand, as Pakula has suggested, the most effective dramatic counterpoint to the investigative journalism on the screen is the audience's awareness of the outcome. Historical hindsight supplies the final connections between the mole-like labours of 'Woodstein' and the political parade which seems to pass by so imperviously on the TV screens, bracketed as the film is by two appearances by the exalted, apparently untouchable Richard Nixon.)

Rather more successfully than 'Woodstein's' own account, which tended to flatten even admitted personal disputes and crises of conscience into the surrounding mass of documentation, the film edges the investigation with a necessary minimum of personality. Apart from one or two actorish highlights – Bernstein's interview with Stans' book-keeper (Jane Alexander), ever so reluctantly co-operating with information about CRP's secret fund – Redford and Hoffman provide subdued but quirkily distinct character sketches. The reporters' lives are simply a function of their jobs, from which their personal surroundings are a brief, barely perceived retreat (a snippet from a broadcast on the Fischer-Spassky tournament heard in Woodward's apartment points slyly at less low-key prima donnas in the public eye).

One or two shots linger on the faces of the human material made use of by the reporters; and in the background, authoritatively functional support is provided by Jack Warden as Metropolitan Editor Harry Rosenfeld and Jason Robards as the *Post's* Executive Editor Ben Bradlee. The script makes a few more conventionally colourful attempts to characterise the President's faceless men being pursued by telephone. Woodward at one point mutters about Hunt coming 'in from the cold'. His mysterious secret contact 'Deep Throat' (Hal Holbrook), tells a story of one of the lesser conspirators, Gordon Liddy, holding his hand in a candle flame at a party, and announcing that the trick is not minding that it hurts. But apart from its curious echo of a scene in *Lawrence of Arabia*, the story pictures a character rather at odds with the book's presentation of Liddy as an ebullient bungler, and with Deep Throat's subsequent assessment of the conspirators: 'Forget the myths the media has created about the White House. The truth is they're not very bright guys ...'

The controlled 'personalising' of the story works well in the initial stages of journalistic enquiry, and in the final scenes of bafflement and shock, when the reporters' eagerness to tie the conspiracy to the White House tempts them into jeopardy as they leap too soon at Nixon's Chief of Staff, H. R. Haldeman. The film's penultimate scene brings the reporters to confer with Bradlee on a darkened lawn about the possible danger to their own lives. But the method creates some fuzziness in the middle stretches, at the stage when what is needed is a synthesis of all the information on who controlled and who received money from the CRP fund, and of how it fitted in with Watergate and the 'dirty tricks' operation run by Segretti and others.

A greater drawback is the extent to which *All the President's Men* is, like *Jaws*, a 'phenomenon' film, and however brilliantly it organises its pursuit of its own Leviathan (the circumstantial investigation) is imaginatively limited by it. Pakula builds the film on a metaphor as confident as the Space Needle sliding from behind the totem pole in *The Parallax View*. In the opening image, typewriter keys explode against paper with the effect of cannon fire, wittily reprised at the end with the artillery salute as Nixon is seen taking his oath of office on a TV set in the press room, while the hammering of the 'Woodstein' typewriters gradually overtakes the strains of 'Hail to the Chief'. But the metaphor remains a rather abstracted gesture to the power of the press, never becoming as powerful an instrument for transforming objective account into subjective experience as the political *trompe l'oeil* of *The Parallax View*, or its psychological equivalent in *Klute*, by which the investigators were steadily drawn in to become symptoms of the problems they were investigating.

Pakula essays flourishes here along similar lines – the camera steadily rising in an overhead shot of the reporters in the Library of Congress, eventually losing them in the ominously expanding architectural patterns; or Woodward taking

fright after leaving one of his underground sessions with Deep Throat and fleeing from shadows. But they remain on the surfaces of a story that has been marshalled with dazzling skill and precision, but lacks the imaginative hooks that might have taken it even further in mood and meaning.

### **Richard Combs, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1976**

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#### **ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MEN**

*Directed by:* Alan J. Pakula

©: Warner Bros., Wildwood Enterprises

*Produced by:* Walter Coblenz

*Associate Producers:* Michael Britton, Jon Boorstin

*Executive Production Manager:* E. Darrell Hallenbeck

*Production Co-ordinators:* Rebecca Britton, Erika Koppitz, Ronnie Kramer

*Location Manager:* Steve Vetter

*Production Assistant:* Buck Holland

*1st Assistant Directors:* Bill Green, Art Levinson

*2nd Assistant Directors:* Charles Ziarko, Kim Kurumada

*Script Supervisor:* Karen Wookey

*Casting:* Alan Shayne

*Casting (Consultant):* Isabel Halliburton

*Screenplay by:* William Goldman

*Screenplay:* Alvin Sargent, Carl Bernstein, Nora Ephron \*

*Based on the book by:* Carl Bernstein, Bob Woodward

*Director of Photography:* Gordon Willis

*Camera Operator:* Ralph Gerling

*1st Assistant Camera:* Ray de la Motte

*Gaffer:* George Holmes

*Key Grip:* Bob Rose

*Best Boy:* Carl Gibson Jr

*Still Men:* Howard Bingham, Louis Goldman

*Special Effects:* Henry Millar

*Film Editor:* Robert L. Wolfe

*Assistant Editors:* Tim O'Meara, Steve Potter

*Production Designer:* George Jenkins

*Assistant Art Director:* Bob Jillson

*Set Decorator:* George Gaines

*Draftsman:* J. George Szeptycki

*Lead Man:* Mike Higelmire

*Property Masters:* Allan Levine, Bill Mac Sems

*Assistant Property Masters:* Matty Azzarone, Guy Bushman

*Construction Co-ordinator:* Robert Krume

*Costume Supervisor:* Bernie Pollack

*Assistant Costumers:* Jules Melillo, G. Perez

*Key Make-up Artist:* Gary Liddiard

*Make-up Artists:* Fern Buchner, Don Cash

*Hairdressers:* Romaine Greene, Lynda Gurasich

*Title Design:* Dan Perri

*Music by:* David Shire

*Music Editor:* Nicholas C. Washington

*Production Sound Mixers:* Jim Webb, Les Fresholtz

*Boom Operators:* Chris McLaughlin, Clint Althouse

*Re-recording Mixers:* Art Piantadosi, Les Fresholtz, Dick Alexander

*Supervising Sound Editor:* Milton C. Burrow

*Research:* Steve Bussard, De Forest Research

*Production Publicist:* Jack Hirshberg

*Studio:* Burbank Studios

#### **Cast**

Dustin Hoffman (*Carl Bernstein*)

Robert Redford (*Bob Woodward*)

Jack Warden (*Harry Rosenfeld*)

Martin Balsam (*Howard Simons*)

Hal Holbrook (*Deep Throat*)

Jason Robards (*Ben Bradlee*)

Jane Alexander (*book-keeper*)

Meredith Baxter (*Debbie Sloan*)

Ned Beatty (*Dardis*)

Stephen Collins (*Hugh Sloan Jr*)

Penny Fuller (*Sally Aiken*)

John McMartin (*Scott, foreign editor*)

Robert Walden (*Donald H. Segretti*)

Frank Wills (*himself*)

F. Murray Abraham (*1st arresting officer*)

David Arkin (*Bachinski*)

Henry Calvert (*Bernard Barker*)

Dominic Chianese (*Eugenio Martinez*)

Bryan E. Clark (*arguing attorney*)

Nicholas Coster (*Markham*)

Lindsay Ann Crouse (*Kay Eddy*)

Valerie Curtin (*Miss Betty Milland*)

Gene Dynarski (*court clerk*)

Nate Esformes (*Virgil Gonzales*)

Ron Hale (*Frank Sturgis*)

Richard Herd (*James W. McCord*)

Polly Holliday (*Dardis' secretary*)

James Karen (*Hugh Sloan's lawyer*)

Paul Lambert (*national editor*)

Frank Latimore (*judge*)

Gene Lindsey (*Baldwin*)

Anthony Mannino (*2nd arresting officer*)

Allyn Ann McLerie (*Carolyn Abbot*)

James Murtaugh (*Library of Congress clerk*)

John O'Leary (*attorney 1*)

Jess Osuna (*Joe, FBI man*)

Neva Patterson (*angry CRP woman*)

George Pentecost (*George*)

Penny Peyser (*Sharon Lyle*)

Joshua Shelley (*Al Lewis*)

Sloane Shelton (*book-keeper's sister*)

Lelan Smith (*3rd arresting officer*)

Jaye Stewart (*male librarian*)

Ralph Williams (*Ray Steuben*)

George Wyner (*attorney 2*)

Leroy Aarons (*financial editor*)

Donnlynn Bennett (*reporter*)

Stanley Clay (*assistant Metro editor*)

Carol Coggin (*news aide*)

Laurence Covington (*news announcer*)

John Devlin (*Metro editor*)

John Furlong (*newsdesk editor*)

Sidney Ganis (*LA stringer*)

Amy Grossman, Cynthia Herbst (*reporters*)

Basil Hoffman (*assistant Metro editor*)

Mark Holtzman (*reporter*)

Jamie Smith Jackson (*Post librarian*)

Barbara Litsky (*reporter*)

Doug Llewelyn (*White House aide*)

Jeff Mackay, Irwin Marcus, Greg Martin (*reporters*)

Ron Menchine (*Starkey*)

Christopher Murray (*photo aide*)

Jess Nadelman (*assistant Metro editor*)

Noreen Nielson (*reporter*)

Florence Pepper (*message desk receptionist*)

Barbara Perlman (*CRP receptionist*)

Louis Quinn (*salesman*)

Peter Salim (*reporter*)

Shawn Shea (*news aide*)

Marvin Smith, Pam Trager (*reporters*)

USA 1976©

138 mins

\* Uncredited

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