

Jen Mintzer
Media & Social Memory
Temple University

Watergate as Remembered in Film

For those who were born after the Watergate scandal in 1972, the “memory” of Watergate doesn’t come from news footage as it did for their parents, but rather through a more lasting medium – film. Though many people may learn about Watergate in high school classrooms from textbooks and teachers who can vividly remember the events surrounding the scandal, the medium of film has the ability to make a longer lasting impression on its audience. Indeed, the slogan on the Blockbuster video cassettes even reads “Great Movies, Great Memories” – indicating that film seems to be regarded as memory vessel of sorts.

Arguably, the most widely watched film regarding the Watergate scandal was “All the President’s Men” which was nominated for Best Picture of 1976. For generations following its release, the lasting memory of Watergate becomes the movie, not the event. An examination of the generational, national and political aspects of the memory of the Watergate scandal will be discussed in this paper in addition to an examination of two films that deal with Nixon in a less factual manner – the satirical 1999 film “Dick” and Oliver Stone’s 1995 pseudo-biographic film “Nixon.”

“All the President’s Men” is different from “Dick” and “Nixon,” however, most notably in that it didn’t have a great deal of temporal distance from the actual event. As such, the news coverage of Watergate was still rather fresh in the minds of the viewer upon the film’s release in theaters. For this generation – the generation that lived through the event and could remember it – “All the President’s Men” served as a memory supplement of sorts. It has been noted, for instance, that the film

“successfully reshaped the memory of Watergate for those who could personally recall the events” (Schacter, 356).

This observation relates directly to Lang & Lang’s assertion that “the relationship between an event and that same event-as-news has been a long standing interest of ours” (Lang & Lang, 123). They further note that this was “most ambitiously [achieved] in our inquiry into the events that made up the Watergate scandal and forced the resignation of Richard Nixon” and that “what is conveyed to the public via the news media can never replicate the event as experienced by the participants actually present at the scene of action” (Lang & Lang, 123).

In this context, the content of “All the President’s Men” is a strange thing to examine in terms of this memory, for the film does try to replicate the events of the participants who were present at the event, or rather the participants who were present at the coverage of the event – something Lang & Lang would, most likely, say would not be as successful as the original news coverage in creating a lasting memory.

On the contrary though, in replicating the story of that “original coverage” on film, it could be argued that the legendary status of the event and the coverage becomes more memorable in the “replicated” telling of it on film. Hence, I argue that the result of recreating the events of the book All the President’s Men in the cinema is far more powerful and resonant in the collective memory than in the original coverage (e.g. the book and the stories that were written in the *Washington Post*).

In the film, for instance, the viewer sees the Watergate break-in, the encounters that Woodward has with “Deep Throat” in the parking garage and the meetings that Woodward and Bernstein have with the White House secretaries who help them verify information. These are all events that were not privy to direct televised media coverage when they were happening.

Thus, "All the President's Men" is trying to "fill in the gaps" in regards to what the public can "see." Simply having a book version of All the President's Men is not enough in distributing a lasting memory in a mass audience – far too few people would actually ever read the entire book anyway. Thus, a visual image is necessary in order for the story of All the President's Men to rival, if not surpass, the memories of the actual first-hand news of Watergate on television and in the press.

Indeed, without a visual equivalent of the book, the story within All the President's Men would not hold as much credence in the broader scope of memory of this event. If a contest were to be held between what the public remembers more - a visual image or the printed word – the image would win out in most cases. Lang & Lang note, for instance, in their survey regarding memories of specific events that 37.8% of the respondents they interviewed had a "vivid memory" of the film "All the President's Men" and 81.4% of the respondents "knew about and remembered" this film (Lang & Lang, 130). They also note that "for some the only vivid personal memory of Watergate was the feature film 'All the President's Men' based on Woodward and Bernstein's account" (Lang & Lang, 134).

This is significant for many reasons and creates a curious dilemma of sorts in terms of memory. "All the President's Men" is a Hollywood film. As such, its primary goal is to entertain an audience, while at the same time turning a profit. Regardless of how accurate or how painful its producers were in trying to keep to the reality of the book (which they apparently took great care to do), it is still a fictionalized event, for this is a dramatic film production.

When the viewer sees Robert Redford's Woodward character meeting with "Deep Throat" in a parking garage, for instance, it is clear that it is a staged, theatrical event. The camera angle and the lighting of this scene are intentionally ultra-dramatic with cigarette smoke lingering in the air to create a mysterious visual image.

The story is “real” in that it is based on true events, yet by the same token the entire telling is not real – these are actors, the sets are lighted, the dialogue is scripted. The story is real, but also not real. This is a Hollywood production, not a documentary.

Furthermore, the memory of the Watergate scandal that is presented in “All the President’s Men” is a biased one. In the film, the protagonists are clear. The viewer is meant to identify with *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. We, the viewer, root for them to crack an informant into giving them the information they need. We know that the Nixon administration is hiding something, and the White House and the Committee to Re-Elect the President are the “antagonists seeking to damage our heroes and protect the President from scrutiny” (Schacter, 356).

It is the presence of a clear-cut protagonist and antagonist that made this film successful though. As Schacter notes “successful narratives often foreground individual protagonists and antagonists rather than structures, trends, or social forces” (Schacter, 357). In particular, he notes that “particular works of arts or efforts at story-telling may live on in memory in ways that overwhelm less dramatic, less lucid, less epitomized, less narrativized ways of telling the past” (Schacter, 357). This is exactly what happens in “All the President’s Men.”

Indeed, in the film, this “dramatization” of events based in real-life confuses the memory. As the viewer sees Robert Redford nervously run from the parking garage after a meeting with the mysterious “Deep Throat,” there is an element of intrigue that might not have truly existed when these events happened. Furthermore, the question will always remain: As the real-life Woodward was writing about his experience in collecting his information, did he unintentionally (or even intentionally) dramatize the memories of these events? Was his account of the story influenced because he wrote this book with the post-story knowledge that the Watergate scandal did, indeed, implicate a great deal of “high up” people in the Nixon administration?

It is significant to note that "All the President's Men" is unique in its narrative as well, for the film ends in January 1973 – six months after the Watergate break-in, with the second inauguration of Richard Nixon and a public backlash against *The Washington Post* for having published a slightly misleading story on the Watergate affair. Only then, as an addendum of sorts, does the viewer see a teletype machine printing out indictments and guilty verdicts on Watergate conspirators and the notice of Nixon's resignation from office.

Specifically, the teletype machine prints out the following:

January 11, 1973

Hunt pleads guilty to three counts of conspiracy

August 17, 1973

Magruder pleads guilty to helping with plan

November 5, 1973

Segretti sentenced to six months

February 26, 1974

Kalmbach pleads guilty to illegal White House...

April 6, 1974

Chapin guilty of lying to grand...

April 12, 1974

Porter gets 30 days in jail for lying

May 17, 1974

Former attorney general Kleindienst enters guilt...

June 4, 1974

Colson pleads guilty to felony – admits justice...

March 13, 1975

Stans admits guilt to charges involving illegal fi...

January 2, 1975

Mitchell, Haldeman, Ehrlichman guilty on all counts in m...

August 6, 1974

Tapes show Nixon approved cover-up, President says he won't resign

August 9, 1974

Nixon resigns

Gerald Ford to become 38th president at noon today

These statements are printed in such rapid succession that the viewer barely has time to comprehend each statement. Upon closer inspection though, one can see that these statements fall out of chronological order toward the end. This is specifically done to fit the narrative telling of the story. Events that do not occur until 1975 are purposefully put before the statements regarding the statement that Nixon resigns.

This telling of the story fits the narrative of memory though. As Schudson notes this account also "has the appeal of a detective story, clue upon clue finally demonstrating a connection between the White House and the burglary's cover-up. He notes that "the detective story form of the Watergate chronology was brilliantly exploited in the most famous and widely read of all Watergate accounts, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's All the President's Men (Schudson, 21).

It is significant to recognize though that a great deal of the Watergate story is omitted in "All the President's Men." Schacter notes that "the actual experience of Watergate did not begin for most Americans until the Senate Watergate committee hearings in the summer of 1973, followed by the Saturday Night Massacre in October, the release of the White House tapes in April 1974, and the House Judiciary Committee hearings in June and July" (Schacter, 356).

All this is omitted from film. Instead, the film tells only half of the story in depth – the half of the story that occurs prior to the explosion of the story on the public scene. It is a story of David and Goliath, with Woodward and Bernstein being "the two-headed David who is young, innocent of politics, ever stumbling and learning...all in the effort to uncover a dark mystery" (Schacter, 356).

Thus, in the narrativization that is perpetuated by the widely seen "All the President's Men," the central story is that of the journalists. It excludes the battles among the branches of the government and presents the story from one point of view.

Indeed, it is interesting to note that, aside from showing some clips of Nixon taking the oath of office in January 1973 on a television set, even Nixon is excluded from the story told. Nothing is told about the incriminating audio tapes, the way in which the break-in was executed or many other specifics. Aside from hearing the names of key figures such as Haldeman, Ehrlichman, Porter, Kleindienst, there is no real knowledge of who they are or what they did. That is all they are in the film – just names.

The resulting effect for those who are learning about this event for the first time, or learning more about the specifics of Watergate, is that it is extremely difficult to follow the course of the story being told. Without the background knowledge of having lived through the news coverage of the event as it happened, the film is confusing. There is no real explanation as to who key figures are in the scheme of things, other than knowing they are “high up” in the Nixon administration and are doing things they shouldn’t be.

Personally, having not been born yet when Watergate occurred, I came to watch this film with a basic understanding of the significance of Watergate and the general story, but the specifics of the story were never a part of my own social memory. There was a break-in at the Watergate hotel at the Democratic headquarters and it was known about by Nixon, which ultimately led to his resignation – born in 1975, this was the extent of my knowledge.

Thus, the impact that “All the President’s Men” has upon memory is a generational one. As Johnson notes in his book, “generational theory suggests that simple knowledge of an event is not enough. An event must have impact and be seen as salient to people’s lives to be retained in collective memory” (Johnson, 111).

Johnson cites that, in a study he conducted, people of various generations were asked which listed events over the last 40 years, including Nixon events, had a critical impact on their outlook on life. Interestingly, Johnson found that “both the direct

experience and mediated knowledge groups gave Nixon poor marks on Watergate and judged him dishonest, but those who learned of Watergate only through the media staked out much more moderate positions" (Johnson, 144).

Johnson also writes that the study he conducted "uncovered a much more complex relationship between memories and images than originally assumed" (Johnson, 148). He concluded that "the Watergate attitudes presented a paradox. Those who clearly remembered early Nixon events were less likely to judge Nixon guilty of Watergate crimes and less likely to see those crimes as serious, contrary to predictions" (Johnson, 148).

Interestingly, Johnson never discusses or addresses the impact of how films about Watergate influenced memory though. Although he concludes his findings to be paradoxical and contrary to his predictions, the findings make sense when film is considered.

When one does not remember something first-hand, it seems a reasonable substitute for most people to turn to learning about it via a mass medium. For many people, this equates to television news and film. With the introduction of film and television coverage, the potential for "spin" increases multifold because a narrative point-of-view must be in place for a successful and "memorable" telling of the story.

Thus, it is not surprising that those people who have a clear memory of early Nixon events to have a more uncertain view of guilt or seriousness of the crime, for the point-of-view that exists regarding Nixon is a complex one that they have built over time. Yet, for those who have little memory of past Nixon events and who are relying on a current telling of the story, the story of becomes simplified in a condensed telling of it (i.e. the good vs. evil approach employed in "All the President's Men"). Thus, generational memory is clearly at play in the way in which Watergate is remembered.

It is important to recognize too that another element is at play in the way "All the President's Men" reverberates in the collective memory as well – the element of national memory. Watergate is a specifically American memory. So much so, that when British director John Schlesinger was offered the chance to direct the film, he declined because he felt the story of Watergate should be told by an American (imdb.com). Schudson notes that Watergate is a distinctly American event and memory as well, and he states that "Americans are vigorous amateur historians even in the most conventional sense of the term" (Schudson, 62). This is interesting, for it poses the question of how the story would have been told if Schlesinger had taken the directorial helm of the film.

Schudson points out that American memory is unique in that "Americans are busy unearthing not only their common history, of a city or region or nation, but their separate histories...American collective memory is now a contested terrain" (Schudson, 63). This assertion is interesting, for it does perhaps explain why Americans seem to be so sensitive to things that are excluded from a story. "All the President's Men" was so successful, perhaps, because it presented the viewpoint of the "underdog" telling of the story – something many Americans can identify with as so many are struggling to carve out a specific identity and common history, for there does not yet exist a long-standing collective history.

This "underdog championing over the powers-that-be" theme ties in with another aspect of "All the President's Men" as well – the truth claims that are inherent in the telling of the story. In essence, the truth claims presented in the film are basic tenets of the press – the notion that the press will relentlessly uncover the truth and instills power in the "common man." Schudson notes, for instance, "the myth of journalism in Watergate asserts that two young Washington Post reporters brought down the president of the United States. This is a myth of David and Goliath, of powerless individuals overturning an institution of overwhelming might. It is high

noon in Washington, with two white-hatted young reporters at one end of the street and the black-hatted president at the other, protected by his minions. And the good guys win. The press, truth as its only weapon, saves the day" (Schudson, 104).

With the film "All the President's Men" the press and news media as a whole become romanticized. The press is presented as being the moral center of the nation by going after the "truth" regardless of the personal costs to the individual reporter. Criticism about *The Washington Post* being a liberal newspaper with its editor Ben Bradlee out with a personal vendetta against Nixon are not included in the story at all. On the contrary, the press in "All the President's Men" is portrayed as being noble and courageous. In the film, Woodward is shown as fighting to be kept on the story because he has an inherent feeling that he can get to the bottom of it because he is relentless and passionate.

Furthermore, in casting Robert Redford as Woodward, the "romanticization" of the press is further aided by Redford's good looks and sex symbol status. On screen, the image of Redford inevitably evokes the memory of all of his past films as well. Having filmed "The Way We Were" and "The Great Gatsby" only a year or two prior to his role in "All the President's Men," Redford was at the height of his sex symbol status in 1976 and this undeniably would have influenced how audiences received him in any other film. The collective memory of an actor's roles surely plays at least some function, if even subconsciously, in how one regards an actor in subsequent roles.

Thus, with many factors at work in "All the President's Men," it is both successful and unsuccessful in various ways. Successful in that it struck at a critical time in 1976 when it had the capacity to reshape the public's collective memory of Watergate by presenting an alternate view of the events from the reporters' point of view. It was unsuccessful though in terms of serving as a longer lasting memory vessel, for it assumes a certain degree of prior knowledge from its audience. As such, it comes across as somewhat confusing for a viewer with little to no prior knowledge

of various references to people or events surrounding the Watergate scandal in general.

Ironically, if anything, I found the parody film "Dick" to be far more enlightening than "All the President's Men," perhaps because it presents the events in a film that is understood to incorporate "the facts" in a less convoluted way. Whereas "All the President's Men" assumes prior knowledge of the viewer, the film "Dick" takes a far more basic approach – one that is necessary in creating a farcical "send-up" of any event.

Though the movie "Dick" does not pretend to be anything but a farcical examination of a historical event, the viewer is better able to get a grasp of the various figures by being introduced to them as ridiculous caricatures. There is less confusion for what the viewer sees on screen for the "reality" of what happened, precisely because it is presented as a farce. The viewer can assume that the world in which "Dick" takes place is one that is "make-believe" due to the comedic nature of the film, but can also recognize that there are certain factual elements included in the story.

For instance, simple facts such as the taping of the lock for access into the Watergate and the erasure of eighteen and a half minutes of tape are alluded to in the story told in "Dick," but these facts were not clearly presented or alluded to at all in "All the President's Men".

Of course, the heroines of "Dick" are two teenage girls who are accidentally and unknowingly responsible for many key events. They are supposed to be the true identity of Woodward and Bernstein's informant "Deep Throat" and this is obviously a comical explanation of how the entire Watergate debacle began. It is meant to be a ridiculous explanation, but also serves to illustrate the ridiculousness of the Watergate scandal in general. It was an event that few reporters even paid any attention to.

Woodward and Bernstein are included in "Dick" too, portrayed by *Saturday Night Live's* Will Ferrell and *The Kids in the Hall's* Bruce McCullough respectively. Most of the cast is either from a comedic background such as these two popular shows or have particular value as "teen star" including *Dawson's Creek's* Michelle Williams and well-known teenage film star Kirsten Dunst.

Upon analyzing "Dick" a bit further and looking at why this film did not make a profit or run very long in theaters, there are several elements that could be credited with its commercial failure relating to its "memory appeal." First and foremost, it was released in 1999 with stars who had a popular appeal to teenagers and young adult movie-goers. This target audience was, at best, extremely young during the Watergate scandal and, as such, there would be no recognition of any of the "inside" references or any prior memory of the subject other than an occasional reference during the course of their lives.

To a youthful audience, the Nixon administration is ancient history. The story needs to appeal to the movie-going audience and, I would argue that Watergate is a memory that has been "fixed" in history already. There is little appeal or need to relive the event again, regardless of how humorous or farcical it is scripted, because the memory does not need to be cathartically relived. As Sturken notes, "part of what makes the mimesis of reenactment cathartic is the anticipation of the even we know is coming" (Sturken, 33). With the story of Watergate and the larger story of Nixon's presidency though, there is no real anticipation of any event. There are no real intriguing moments that elude knowledge.

Moreover, "Dick" did not become a commercial success because it failed to attract an audience that had background knowledge about Watergate. Indeed, it was people with background knowledge of Watergate who would get the inside jokes – who would be able to understand why it was humorous that a plumber's van was following the girls, why it was amusing to see Nixon's paranoia tied to marijuana-laced

cookies or why the explanation of the missing 18 and a half minutes of tape is a tongue-in-cheek laugh. To many young viewers, the connection between real life facts and the parody that is acted out in "Dick" could very well go unnoticed if the viewer has no prior knowledge of the history of the Nixon administration. The humor falls flat for those without a basic knowledge of the Watergate scandal.

Another commercial failure that failed to attract a mass audience was Oliver Stone's 1995 film "Nixon." Again, I contend that this film was not appealing to a mass audience because there really was no longer a need to "rehash" the memory of Nixon any longer. It is not surprising that the film "Nixon" came into fruition immediately following Richard Nixon's death in 1994 though.

It seems intuitive on the part of a filmmaker to feel justified in beginning a biographically based film once the subject's life comes to an end. Only with the death of the subject can a "definitive" story telling even be attempted by a filmmaker. Indeed, if the story is told while the living subject is still alive, there exists too much chance of receiving a refutation of the story being told.

From his research on memory, Johnson concluded that "memory of events is clearly influenced by the passage of time" (Johnson, 111). Likewise, British historian Peter Burke echoes this sentiment saying that "remembering the past and writing about it no longer seem the innocent activities they were once taken to be. Neither memories nor histories seem objective any longer. In both cases, this selection, interpretation and distortion is socially conditioned" (Schacter, 347).

These observations seem to be appropriate in analyzing Oliver Stone's approach to telling of the story of Nixon and Watergate, for Stone is well known for putting his own spin on historical events in the films he creates.

Historical critics of "Nixon," such as historian Stephen Ambrose, have noted that key events are ignored, central scenes are made-up, and Nixon uses words he never used" and that the film "may be great entertainment, perhaps even great

drama...[but] it is not history" (Ambrose, 1530). Taking this sentiment a step further, Christopher Hitchens writes that "the Nixon revision has been under way for some time" (Hitchens, 8).

Stone, himself, however contends that this revision is necessary in many ways and that it is the historians that do deleting of facts themselves, for it is inevitable. In an interview Stone did with Cineaste in 1997, he said, "As the historian Hayden White points out in his book, Tropics of Discourse, the narrative interpretation provided by historians is definitely subjective because there are simply too many facts to include in any historical work, so facts have to be deleted in order to give an interpretation" (Crowdus, 38).

From this statement, it is clear that Stone is extremely aware of the various elements that play into memory. In this interview and others, he makes reference to various works dealing with memory and narrative. Thus, he takes the role of filmmaker as a knowing and calculating participant in shaping memory.

It is interesting to note that Stone also said in his Cineaste interview that "Nixon was a master revisionist of his own history, and wrote six or seven books after he left office, revising everything he had done. He was a master at that, and was very conscious of his place in history, so we will have great difficulty in really understanding the 'facts' about Nixon" (Crowdus, 38).

Stone, thus, seems to see his interpretation of history as being no different from the history that the person at the center of the events has tried to interpret. Stone is taking the "American" approach to storytelling much like "All the President's Men" in that he offers an alternative version of memory with his films, refusing to accept that the story is done being told.

In the case of Nixon, though, the story is complete for the most part. Nixon's lack of charisma during his life kept him out of the public eye by and large after he left office and, unlike the Kennedy clan, there were no real collective public affection for

the Nixons. Thus, for the most part, the story of Watergate got laid to rest after a certain amount of time and failed to be embraced again in the 1990s because there was no longer a collective memory in American culture regarding the background of the event.

Thus, "All the President's Men", "Dick" and "Nixon" achieve different things in terms of memory. Generationally, politically, and nationally, the memory of Watergate and the Nixon administration has changed slightly over time, but never again will it be as malleable as it was directly following the Watergate scandal. For this reason, "All the President's Men" has emerged as a film classic, for it capitalized on the public's need to forge a common memory of a confusing and absurd event. The film struck while the [memory] iron was hot, so to speak, and in receiving critical acclaim from film critics, it has achieved a level of "credibility" that other accounts of the story have not.

Works Cited

- Ambrose, S. (Mar 1996). Nixon: An Oliver Stone Film. The Journal of American History, 82(4), 1530.
- Crowdus, G. (1997). History, dramatic license, and larger historical truths: An interview with Oliver Stone. Cineaste, 22(4), 38-42.
- Hitchens, C. (Jan. 22, 1996). Re-bunking Dick. The Nation, 262(3), 8.
- Internet Movie Database. www.imdb.com
- Johnson, T. J. (1995). The rehabilitation of Richard Nixon: the media's effect on collective memory. New York: Garland.
- Lang, K. and G. E. Lang. (1989) Collective memory and the news. Communication 11, 123-39.
- Schacter, D. L., Coyle, J. T., & Harvard Center for the Study of Mind Brain and Behavior. (1995). Memory distortion: how minds, brains, and societies reconstruct the past. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Schudson, M. (1992). Watergate in American memory: how we remember, forget, and reconstruct the past. New York: Basic Books.
- Sturken, M. (1997). Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering. Berkeley: University of California Press.