Bob Woodward

He's investigated US Presidents, Supreme Court justices, the CIA—even Hollywood—and come away criticized but vindicated. Now Bob Woodward faces the other side of the notebook and reveals the techniques that make him a great investigative journalist.

Gets to

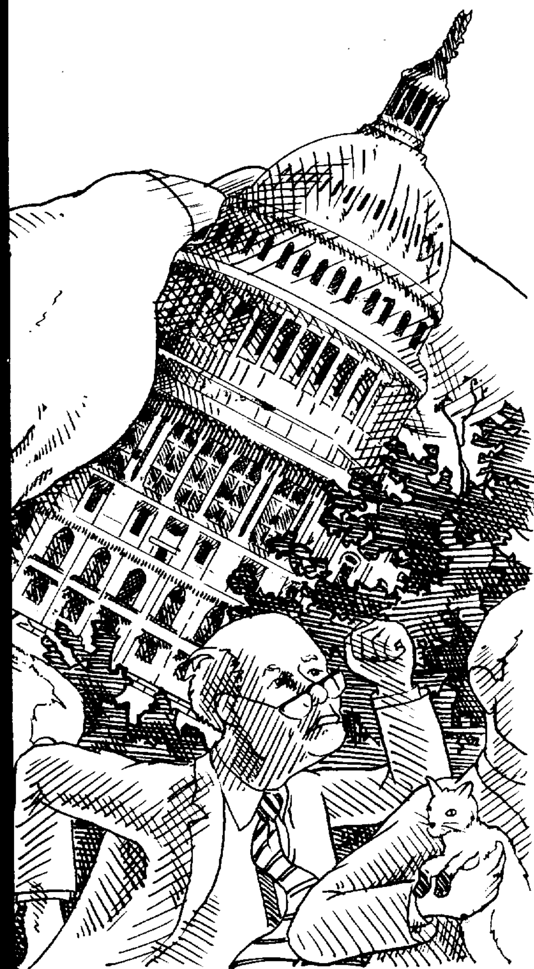
the Bottom o

BY MITCHELL BARD

To public officials, the two scariest words in nonfiction just might be *Bob Woodward.*

It's been more than 20 years since Woodward and Carl Bernstein helped bring down President Richard Nixon through their revelations about Watergate in *The Washington Post*, events they later elaborated on in the book *All the President's Men.* The Pulitzer prize-winning reports established the team as the country's preeminent investigative journalists. They teamed again to write another bestselling book on the Nixon presidency, *The Final Days.*

Illustration by Daniel Anthony Kisner



The team dissolved after that book, but Woodward continues to be the bane of the famous and the influential, writing a series of bestselling books on the excesses of power in Washington: *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA 1981-1987, The Brethren: Inside the Supreme Court* (with Scott Armstrong), *The Commanders* about the Pentagon and, most recently, *The Agenda: Inside the Clinton White House.* He's also profiled the former Vice-President (with David Broder) in *The Man Who Would Be President: Dan Quayle*, and taken on the entertainment industry with *Wired: The Short Life and Fast Times of John Belushi.* Today, he's assistant managing editor for investigative news at the *Post* and working on his next book, an examination of the 1996 presidential campaign.

Today's news business is full of investigative journalists. Some are good, some aren't. Like any profession, skills and diligence are meted out to individuals in a wide range of quantity.

So how did Woodward become so good at what he does? The secret, he says, is *time.* "I started at the *Montgomery County Sentinel* and what the editor kindly did was give me the time so I could spend days on things. Normally, for a weekly paper, every reporter had to write half a dozen stories, and sometimes I only wrote one or two. So I had the luxury to go and look at records, go to Baltimore to find out that the Attorney General's firm had received fees from a bunch of defunct insurance companies. I had time to track things down.

"In Watergate, Carl Bernstein and I again had the luxury of time. That's the first step, time against the problem. We worked more than two years and wrote lots of stories. The job of a writer should be to get to the bottom of things, or try to get to the bottom of things, and that takes time."

The difference between investigative reporters and other journalists, Woodward suggests, is that most journalists have a deadline to gather as much information as possible, whereas the investigative types work on a story as long as it takes to finish it. The length of the story is not the issue, he adds. "I've read very short articles that have really gotten to the bottom of things. I've read whole books that haven't. The full explanation is more authentic. That's what's fun. In daily journalism, you have to get things on the run as they occur, and it's difficult. I admire good people who do that every day. But you don't come back and say, 'Did I get to the bottom of this?' "

f Things

Sifting out the Story

Good stories are everywhere. It's up to the journalist to determine which merit following. "You need someone with firsthand knowledge. I get calls all day from people who say, 'This is bigger than Watergate,' and it'll turn out to be either trivial or something they heard on a plane from someone whose name they don't remember. On the other hand, you'll get somebody who says, 'I work at the Treasury Department and yesterday I saw a memo that said . . .' So you sift. You must be able to judge the quality of the information."

In addition to getting ideas from others, Woodward follows the journalist's credo of comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. "I try to write about power and the exercise of it. I guess, temperamentally, a writer like myself is a conservative. We're distrustful of power, knowing that large concentrations of power are unsafe unless they're examined. That's not a political conservatism; that's a constitutional conservatism. It's real easy to get concentrated power, so I try to look at the Pentagon or the White House, the Supreme Court or the CIA."

Freelancers who don't live in Washington can still find stories about power, says Woodward. "Just ask yourself, what are people talking about? What's important? One of the stories I wrote—I must have been 28 working for the *Montgomery County Sentinel*—was an evaluation of all the high school principals in Montgomery County. I'd never written a story that created such a firestorm. Hundreds of people picketed the newspaper. One of the principals sued for libel, unsuccessfully, ultimately. Obviously the quality of education was very important to the people of that community. It was a real eye-opener to see the emotions parents felt about saying this principal's good, this principal's not good, this principal's not suited. So writers should ask what's important to people of this area, this town, this state, this community, this neighborhood and write about it."

Issues related to power and politics aren't limited to government, adds Woodward. "There's power in business,

in the information age, the communications industry, in publishing."

Writing a biography of comedian John Belushi may seem far afield from investigating Washington's powerful institutions, but Woodward disagrees. "Do you know what's interesting? Everything is political. Even the story of John Belushi and his rise and demise in the drug culture. The Hollywood world was political in the sense that the story was about a drug addict and the people close to him who either knew, or had sufficient clues, that he was a drug addict. They had neither the knowledge nor the courage to save him. When I wrote about this, their reaction was very much like Washington politicians: 'Let's cover it up and deny it.' They even had agents and people try to stop the movie [of the book] from being made. It became as politicized as the defense budget or the Clinton economic plan."

"I kind of view **criticism** as **coming with the territory."**

Talking to People

Woodward's formula for "getting to the bottom of things" is straightforward. "The approach is to talk to people, then go back, then go back *again*. Talk to more people. Get more questions. Look at the written record, look at the paper trail, follow the money, follow the things that are concrete. You have to go through the checklist of procedures."

Woodward offers his current research as an example. "I'm doing a campaign book and there are all these candidates and 'maybe' candidates. Take candidate X. Well, he has a wife. I want to talk to his wife. I want to talk to his best friends, his pollster, his media adviser, his campaign manager, his press secretary, his banker. I want to talk to the speechwriter, the communications director, the political director. The matrix gets giant."

A good starting point for any investigation is to seek sources who can answer basic questions. "I go to people for education," says Woodward. "How does the economy work? How do you start a presidential campaign? When I began my book on the Supreme Court, I went to Justice Potter Stewart. He outlined the book for me in a five-hour meeting. I didn't even know who was on the Supreme Court then. I had a general idea, but if you tested me, I couldn't have said, 'These are the nine sitting justices.' "

Woodward asked simple questions to learn about the justices. "What are the blocks on the Supreme Court? Who votes together, who's friendly with whom, who shares ideology and commitment? Who has lunch?" Oddly enough, he says, "not bringing baggage helped—including the baggage of knowing who was on the court."

It's one thing to decide who you *want* to talk to, but it's another to persuade the subjects to talk to you. Why do Presidents, CIA directors, and others in positions of power tell Woodward their secrets? The key, he says, is winning their trust.

One way to earn trust is to promise sources anonymity. Critics frequently focus on the lack of attribution to suggest information is untrue, comes from unreliable or insignificant sources, or is used to advance the writer's agenda. Woodward believes the opposite is true. "The benefit of good sources who don't want to be identified is they might tell you the truth. There's an assumption people often make that if something's on the record, it's the truth. Unfortunately, as we now know—and I guess we've always known—lots of lies are told on the record. By going to people and saying, 'I'm not going to identify you and I'm going to check everything,' they will hear the rumblings of the checking because they'll talk to other people who talk to me and so forth. It allows you to cross-check and double- and triple-check what goes on."

Talking to sources off the record is also a practical necessity. "People aren't going to talk about sensitive political, diplomatic, intelligence and military activities on the record," Woodward says. "We're kidding ourselves if we think they are. They just aren't. There isn't a reporter in Washington who doesn't realize that."

Reporters also know sources often have axes to grind and hope to use journalists for their own purposes. Woodward says the way around this is to focus on specifics. "If you look at all my books, they deal with people's actions, because I think action is character and actions are always very specific. So-and-so sat down and discussed on this date with this person and the following happened."

But knowing the specifics isn't enough, adds Woodward. Writers also must continually reexamine their assumptions and test the information they gather with others—and against common sense. Watergate, Woodward says, was a good example of having to test assumptions. "The conventional wisdom was that Nixon's too smart [to have committed any crimes]. Well, of course, it turned out he wasn't too smart. It turned out there were lots of very obvious clues along the way, and it was just a matter of getting hold of the thread on the sock. We systematically had to go through people who worked at the White House, people in the Committee to Reelect the President."

Well, if you're Bob Woodward of *The Washington Post*, sources *have* to talk to you, don't they? Freelancers don't have that cachet, right? Woodward disagrees. "I don't think it has anything to do with me or the *Post*. It has to do with the power of information. If I've done work and have some documents and have some details and call someone up and say, 'I'm doing this book and I understand last Thursday at 2 p.m. you talked to so-and-so and said the following,' they're either going to say yes or no, or tell you what they recall happening. When you call someone and say other people have said you said the following, that person's going to deal with it. It's the *it* they're dealing with, not me. It's the information.

"You have to get to know people. People in the neighborhood. Go see people at night. Get them when they're relaxed."

People will also be more receptive, Woodward adds, if you explain the context of your investigation. For his current research he tells sources, "I'm doing this book about the campaign and this is the way I want to present it. And I want to understand how you managed the communications plan or how you managed the money or who signed the checks. And this is in the context of this book that will present all the candidates."

Investigative journalists can't cut corners when it comes to research. Some of the motivation is journalistic integrity, but part is knowing that mistakes won't escape notice (and can provoke lawsuits). Woodward says, "I don't think there's anything in any of my books of major import that's wrong."

As an example he cites *The Com-*

manders, a book about the Gulf War that focuses heavily on then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell. "He's a very picky person," says Woodward of Powell, who castigated *The New York Times* in his memoirs because the paper reported that he sent a letter to somebody that he didn't. Woodward points out that Powell's memoirs don't quarrel with the General's portrait in *The Commanders*. "He's got more than 100 appearances in my book. And it's not that all the references are favorable. . . . They show both his strengths and weaknesses. How did I get it right that he has no quarrel with me?

"Powell has acknowledged publicly that he talked to me. I talked to hundreds of other people, got documents, got notes, got letters, got memos. To get it right requires a continuous process of cross-reference."

How much cross-checking is enough to get it right? Woodward seeks as many confirmations as he can get. If only two people were involved in a conversation, many writers feel they must get one or both sources to tell what was said, but Woodward suggests other ways to confirm information. Maybe, he says, one of the participants talked to a third person, or perhaps the substance of the meeting was documented in a letter or memo. "There are all kinds of ways to cross-check information."

When It's Time to Write

One of the advantages to investigative journalism is that writer's block is rarely a problem. "There's nothing to be blocked on other than my own laziness or sloth," says Woodward. "The information is there. If it's not, I know I better go get it."

Still, putting everything down on paper requires discipline. Woodward tries to start working at 5 or 6 a.m. and churns out ten pages a day during the writing phase of each book. "All of the pages aren't keepers. But 50 writing days like that and you can get 500 pages done. If you have a quota, you get efficient."

Woodward also increases his efficiency by writing as he researches, rather than waiting until his source material is complete. "I started writing this book in June and it's now October. Five months later, I've written more than 500 pages. Sometimes I'll have three or four writing days a week. Last week, I had only one. I'm doing one of the candidates now . . . one of the key strategic meetings on a certain day. I've laid out all the interviews with the people who were at the meeting. Someone gave me the 12 things that were talked about at this meeting. I'm working right now on some focus groups that were done. Okay, here's the interview done with the person who conducted the focus groups. Here are the key players and what they said. Here's the interview with the candidate and his reaction to the focus group."

Once he has gathered information, he puts it in files built around his interviews. He creates a file on a candidate, for example, then fills it with clips, background material and interviews with key people. A second organizing principle for Woodward is chronology. "Everyone lives their life in chronological order; things happen in chronological order. It's the best way to tell a story, provides the best context. So I sat down with *The Agenda* and said, 'Where do I want to start? What was a key moment?' Obviously a key moment was when Clinton decided to run. So the book opens with the scene of he and Mrs. Clinton in bed and she's saying, 'You're going to run.' She knows it, but he's much more hesitant. It sets the scene for her role in this and his uncertainty about it, and then it goes in chronological order."

Woodward knows the information matrix grows exponentially, so projects could go on indefinitely. Woodward sometimes spends years researching a subject, but also knows when to stop: "When you have enough of the story that hasn't been previously told. You can always do more. It's a matter of whether the work is intimate and new and sufficiently explanatory to merit a book."

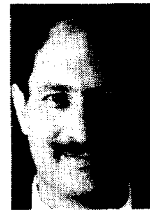
After a book is done, investigative journalists can expect more criticism than most writers. Woodward has been a frequent target of critics, but remains unfazed. "If you're not really digging into something, getting to the bottom of it, people probably aren't going to be angry about it. I started working at the *Post* doing Watergate when people didn't believe it could happen. The press secretary, Ron Ziegler; the Nixon campaign committee chairman, Clark MacGregor; and Bob Dole, the Republican National Committee Chairman, would all gang up on us and do 45 minutes of denunciation. When you're getting to what really happened, you're going to make people angry, because they have a stake in denying it.

Each time books come out, or things come out, people say, 'How can you say that? How can you do that?' There's a celebrated Kissinger prayer scene that came out in *The Final Days*. People were up in arms: 'How could you know that? That can't be true.' Then Kissinger's memoirs come out, and you see it was even worse. We portrayed Nixon as out of control. He wasn't out of control, he was shattered. Kissinger's version was much more emotional, more melodramatic in defining the man. . . . I kind of view criticism as coming with the territory."

Also coming with the territory is the sometimes difficult nature of breaking into investigative journalism. Newspaper cutbacks suggest the environment isn't conducive to allowing reporters the time that Woodward says is so important. "There are still places that offer a supportive environment to take time—if you can produce and do it efficiently," he says. "The key is efficient use of time. You don't spend a month on something that can be done in two days. A young reporter could go to an editor at a weekly paper in a small community and say, 'What's wrong with the school budget? Why do they have to raise taxes so much when there are fewer students, fewer teachers, lower test scores?' I think someone could do that efficiently in weeks, and I can't imagine any serious editor of any serious newspaper—and I know these people, they care about their community—who wouldn't say, 'Okay, let's make a run at it.' "

Staff reporters may have that option, but freelancers might have a tough time getting a newspaper editor to listen to an idea for an investigative piece. Woodward agrees it's difficult, but says it's possible. "Sy Hersh came in with the story of the My Lai massacre as a freelancer. I don't think the *Post* ran it, but a number of papers did. He was a freelancer and he had the story. If you have the story, editors will use it. I agree it's hard. You're battling a system. But it's fun to do battle with systems." WD

Mitchell Bard



Mitchell Bard couldn't get Woodward to reveal the identity of Deep Throat, but he has gotten information out of former Quayle chief of staff Bill Kristol for *Jewish Monthly* and Librarian of Congress James Billington for *The World and I*, as well as numerous government officials who requested anonymity.