

# ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MEN

By Mike Canning

**Introduction:** Based on the Pulitzer Prize-winning 1974 book, the film version of *All the President's Men* focuses firmly on the first five months of the Watergate scandal, starting with a re-enactment of the break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters in June 1972 and leading up to *The Washington Post's* revelations about the Nixon Administration's campaign of sabotage against its political rivals and the resulting cover-up. Beginning with the first, tentative coverage by Bob Woodward (Robert Redford) and Carl Bernstein (Dustin Hoffman), obscure writers on the Metro beat, the film chronicles both their dogged reporting work as well as the development of a personal and professional rapport between two very different individuals.

A parade of *Post* journalists and a host of Nixon Administration sources are incorporated into a narrative that also highlights Woodward's secret meetings with his crucial source "Deep Throat" (Hal Holbrook), an administration insider who guided the reporters on their investigation. The tension rises with the reporters under threat and editor Ben Bradlee (Jason Robards, Jr.) willing to take a chance on them.

**Background:** This landmark Washington film was initiated by the politically minded Redford, who was gripped by the Watergate story. He bought the rights to the book in 1974 for \$450,000 and got financing from Warner Brothers Studios with a budget of \$5 million. Hollywood veteran William Goldman was hired as the screenwriter. In his autobiography *Adventures in the Screen Trade*, Goldman said he "hacked away at the morass of material" until he reached one conclusion: "Throw away the last half of the book" to concentrate the drama.



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No one was satisfied with the original script, and Goldman recounts in his memoir how, after working on it for six months, he was called by Redford to the latter's New York apartment to consider a new script by Bernstein and his then girl friend Nora Ephron. The incident infuriated Goldman who called the move a "gutless betrayal" by Redford, who ultimately rejected that version, only one scene of which ever made it into the film. Finally, Redford and his director, Alan J. Pakula, took a crack at the script, booking rooms at the Madison Hotel across from *The Post* offices for a month to finalize it.

Although some of Goldman's script was jettisoned by the end, he would go on to win the Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay. The prize came at some cost for Goldman, however, who concluded, because of the 15 months of agony he suffered working on the project, that if there were anything to change in his movie life, "I wouldn't have come near 'All the President's Men.'"

*All the President's Men* had a splashy DC premiere on April 4, 1976 at the Kennedy

Center in Washington before its general release. The director and the principal actors hobnobbed with political leaders and other dignitaries in what was a benefit for the Fund for Investigative Journalism.

**Production Notes:** *The Washington Post* itself covered the filmmakers' invasion of its premises in a long article written in April 1975, one year before the film's release. It noted that Hoffman and Redford "hung out in *The Post* offices for months, sitting in on news conferences and conducting research for their roles," with Redford often a distraction to employees when he roamed the floor.

Redford, in a biography, stated that "contrary to what's been written," Katherine Graham "did not block us filming at *The Post*. We filmed for two weeks, but it went haywire." The reason, said Redford, was that "the journalists and secretaries went crazy when Hollywood came in their midst. It was all giggling women and people doing their makeup and a general feeling of disorder...we knew we had to get out of there."

Before fleeing the paper's fabled newsroom, however, set designers took precise measurements of the newspaper's offices and photographed everything. Even boxes of authentic period *Post* "trash" were gathered and transported to sets recreating the newsroom on two soundstages in Warners' Burbank studios at a cost of \$200,000. The filmmakers went to great lengths to achieve accuracy and authenticity, including making replicas of phone books of the period, the *Post* article noted.

According to the film's producer, Walter Coblenz, the shoot in DC was difficult: "They just didn't want us in Washington, so every permission was a stranglehold," he said. "We shot at the Library of Congress, for example, and they just didn't want us. There was anger and denial all around. We were told that the incident portrayed in the book was inaccurate, that the library had never been involved (in the reporters'

researches). That drove Woodward mad, because he knew what was true, he was *there*."

Coblenz also reported that the filmmakers thought they had approval from Ron Nessen, President Ford's press secretary, to stage a briefing scene in the White House, and even scripted it in. "Of course, we were naïve," Coblenz added: "There was no way (President) Ford would allow Redford to come to the White House to diss the previous president. We were suddenly told it was all off; the administration didn't approve. It felt hugely ironic."

There was an argument over *All the President's Men's* ending. Director Pakula wanted the iconic footage of Nixon's defiant wave from the Presidential helicopter, but Redford demurred, saying "This isn't about Nixon. It's about journalism. I want to end with the guys just working away." A compromise was reached which closes the film—the clattering image of a teletype announcing Nixon's resignation.

**Comments:** Rare for a serious political drama, the film proved a considerable financial success, earning Warner Brothers Pictures over \$30 million in the US in its first release. The film was also a great critical success, winning four Oscars (for adapted screenplay, sound, art direction, and Robards' supporting performance as Bradlee) and being nominated for four others, including Best Picture of the Year (it lost to *Rocky*).

The film was universally lauded, *The New York Times'* rave review by critic Vincent Canby being fairly typical:

*Newspapers and newspapermen have long been favorite subjects for moviemakers,...yet not until All the President's Men, the riveting screen adaptation of the Watergate book..., has any film come remotely close to being an accurate picture of American journalism at its best.*

The notoriously hard-to-please movie critic John Simon, extolled the film's acting:

*From Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman down to the least bit player there is such perfection of acting as one scarcely associates with Hollywood filmmaking. And not only do the performances act and look convincing, they are even splendid likenesses, as far as I can judge.... It is well worth seeing All the President's Men twice; once for everything about it, and once more just for the acting.*

It has since become the gold standard for films on investigative journalism.

**DC/Hill Notes:** Outside of its singular set for *The Post's* newsroom, *All the President's Men* uses DC locations as fully and consistently as any Washington-based movie ever made by a Hollywood studio. Not only are many locations used, but they are used appropriately, and in a few cases, strikingly.

-- Scenes take place at the Kennedy Center, in Lafayette Park, at the Hoover FBI Building, in an actual District courtroom, at the exterior of *The Washington Post* building, at the White House's north gate, at the Justice Department (FBI), and, most appropriately, at the Watergate complex and at the Howard Johnson Motor Lodge across the street (where the infamous "plumbers" had their base). The apartment where Woodward lives, and signals Deep Throat with a potted plant, is located at a building on the 1700 block of P Street NW.

-- One significant location—the ominous parking garage where Woodward meets Deep Throat—did not use a DC site. Those sequences were shot in the garage of the ABC Entertainment Center building in Century City, Los Angeles.

-- The filmmakers also provided a neat cameo: the security guard in the film who discovers the Watergate burglars is played by Frank Wills, the actual guard on duty on the night of the break-in. The sequence was recreated in the same Watergate building.

**Library of Congress Filming:** Perhaps the film's most imaginative use of locales is the

sequence when Woodward and Bernstein visit the Jefferson Building of the Library of Congress to gain access to some White House records. The most effective part of the sequence is shot inside the Library's famed Main Reading Room, where, as the reporter's rifle through library check-out cards, the camera slowly backs straight up to the very top of the Library's grand dome, with a view down on the now puny protagonists. According to one source, the production "devoted three weeks to pulling apparatus up 600 stairs to achieve a dramatic upward pull-away shot."

That dramatic shot almost never happened. According to a contemporary report in a local business journal, the company, after spending two weeks building a platform from which a camera could obtain a bird's eye view of the Reading Room, hit a snag. Then:

*Forty-eight hours before the shoot, permission to film was suddenly revoked by an official who was horrified to see the platform hanging from pulleys attached to the Library dome. After hours of desperate telephoning, the producers finally reached...Jack Valenti (then head of the MPAA). Valenti put them in touch with Congressman John Brademas, who sits on the Library committee of the House of Representatives. Thanks to Brademas' intercession, the scene was shot.*

The Library shoot was also the scene of an unfortunate incident that affected future access to the building. Stuart Neumann, long a DC location manager and a production assistant during this filming, recalled the event in an interview. A member of the rigging crew was running cables up in a false ceiling with acoustical tiles when the ceiling broke and the fellow fell right on an office desk of a Library of Congress employee. The Librarian of Congress was not happy, and the building was considered off limits for some years to commercial film crews.

**Minor Goofs:** Even with a movie so steeped in actual locations, *All the*

*President's Men* does contain a shooting "goof" here and there. A few examples:

- Bernstein eats out with a contact at an open air restaurant with a striking view of the Jefferson and Lincoln Memorials. The scene was actually filmed on the top deck of the Kennedy Center to attain that view, yet, while it provides a wonderful Washington vista, there has never been outdoor service at the eateries on that top floor.
- Woodward is shown at one point driving east in front of the White House then is immediately shown in front of the Kennedy Center, which is **west** of the White House.
- Woodward walks on 17th Street to the corner of the Corcoran Gallery at G Street NW (The Old Executive Office Building is seen in the background) and uses a phantom telephone booth (there has never been one at that corner) to call Deep Throat.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

*Mike Canning has been the movie reviewer for the **Hill Rag** newspaper on Capitol Hill since 1993 and is a member of the Washington Area Film Critics Association. He is the author of "Hollywood on the Potomac: How the Movies View Washington, DC," from which this article is adapted. His reviews and writings on film can also be found online at [www.mikesflix.com](http://www.mikesflix.com)*