

Washington's Confessor

In Shadow, presidential aides and lawyers look out for themselves, not the president

By Art Levine

BOB WOODWARD HAS BEEN GETTING A bum rap for his latest book, *Shadow: Five Presidents and the Legacy of Watergate*. There's something about this best-selling investigative legend offering yet another inside Washington narrative—complete with dialogue-laden confidential meetings based on “anonymous” sources—that inflames critics.

Unfortunately, most of them are missing the deeper scandal that lies at the heart of Woodward's book and the larger significance of his body of work. Maybe it's just that they're jealous that 25 years after changing American politics and journalism with his reporting on Watergate (with Carl “Where are they now?” Bernstein), Woodward is still raking in millions and working as hard as ever—while many of them can't get Vernon Jordan to return their phone calls, let alone spend hours with them reconstructing the minutiae of meetings.

Much of the criticism has a familiar ring. There was Steve Brill picking apart Woodward as an irresponsible fabricator who doesn't let facts or contradictory stories get in the way of a good tale, or Frank Rich in *The New York Times Magazine* deriding Woodward as an elitist prig protecting Washington's Clinton-hating permanent establishment. In addition, others piled on with more Woodward-bashing over questionable sourcing and plodding writing style, and Woodward's work also faced a relatively novel critique (for him): Where are the big bombshells? In this view, with so much of the Monica Lewinsky scandal already aired in our 24-hour news culture, what's the big deal if, say, Rep. Henry Hyde secretly tried to arrange a censure deal? As *Fortune* magazine headlined its

review: “Excuse Us, Bob, But This Dirt's Been Dug.” Somehow, despite all these supposed weaknesses, the book has become a best-seller.

SHADOW

By Bob Woodward
Simon & Schuster
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In truth, Woodward's book offers shocking, riveting evidence of duplicity, hypocrisy, and improprieties. I'm not referring to the behavior of post-Watergate Presidents and their top aides, though, but the willingness of President

Clinton's attorneys, associates, and trusted advisers to spill their guts to the Svengali-like Woodward, all in the hopes of burnishing their own reputations and distancing themselves from the cover-ups they helped perpetuate. The irony of it all is that these same aides and attorneys, particularly David Kendall and Bob Bennett, fought tooth and nail—including mounting largely failed Supreme Court appeals—to “protect” the president from making disclosures in every scandal from Whitewater through Lewinsky: whether it involved facing disruptive civil lawsuits, disclosing confidential discussions with White House aides and counsels, or responding to intimate, humiliating questions from his legal enemies. The result was that Clinton's not-so-loyal soldiers spent millions of dollars and years of the public's time stonewalling Ken Starr and Paula Jones' attorneys as long as possible and stupidly triggering federal court decisions that effectively rob any president of the right to hold confidential meetings; all the while mouthing platitudes about the dignity of the office and the need to preserve the ability of the president to do the nation's business.

Then they turn around and offer Woodward juicy morsels about the president's blood tests and penis. Here's Detective Woodward's report on the president giving a blood sample to see if his DNA matched that on the notorious blue Gap dress:

“At 10:10 p.m., Clinton, Kendall, White House Physician Dr. Connie Mariano, [Starr deputy Bob]

ART LEVINE is a contributing editor for *The Washington Monthly* and *U.S. News and World Report*.

Bittman and an FBI agent met in the White House Map Room, where President Franklin Roosevelt monitored the course of World War II. Kendall made a weak joke about having always wanted one of his clients to give blood. Clinton shot him a look that could freeze water. The president rolled up his right sleeve and Dr. Mariano extracted approximately 4 milliliters of blood. It was a painful invasion of Clinton's privacy. The president showed his unhappiness."

Bill Clinton—and the book's readers—no doubt appreciate the tender solicitude Woodward and his sources show for the President's privacy. Equal sensitivity is shown by Bob Bennett, who graciously shares his up-close-and-personal insights about the state of the President's dick. Again, the all-seeing, all-knowing Sultan of Sources gives us the inside scoop:

"Bennett had tried ... to obtain the details from the statement Jones had made about Clinton allegedly having 'distinguishing characteristics' in his genital area. It hadn't worked, but Bennett wanted to make sure there were no such characteristics.

At first Bennett thought it might be a mole or birthmark. So he started asking longtime male Clinton friends who might have seen him in the shower at one point or another in his life. Had they seen anything? No one had.

Later, Bennett was in the Oval Office with Clinton, and the president had to go to the washroom. For a moment, Bennett thought of following the president into the Oval Office bathroom to see what he might see, but he decided against it. 'We can't have president of the United States' penis on trial,' Bennett finally said to Clinton directly. 'There is an ough factor in politics.' 'It's an outrage,' Clinton replied. 'It's totally not true. Go to all my doctors. It's just false.'"

So Sherlock Bennett continues his dogged search for the truth about the President's wee-wee, and we learn more than we care to know in the rest of this section about what the doctors found. Woodward reports that exams by current and former doctors—including new ones ordered by Bennett by a urologist and a dermatologist—found no abnormalities or blemishes. Still, even Bob Bennett has to draw the line somewhere: "The only step that was not taken was to ask the doctor to induce an erection to reduplicate the circumstances that Jones had alleged. That was unthinkable."

Yet Bob Bennett thinks nothing about sharing, directly or indirectly, with Bob Woodward privileged attorney-client discussions and, it seems, the results of confidential medical reports. Bennett has denied being a source for Woodward—perhaps out of a concern that he'd be disciplined for violating the lawyer's eth-

ical code about confidentiality—and some commentators, including Steve Brill, have actually believed his implausible denials. (Woodward has noted that he didn't interview Clinton, but won't disclose whether he spoke to Bennett.)

In the September issue of *Brill's Content*, for instance, Brill offers as Exhibit #1 in the case against Woodward a key conversation between Bennett and Clinton when they stroll on the White House grounds, cigars in hand, male bonding underway. Bennett is, as always in *Shadow*, the tough-talking good guy urging his weasel client, Bill Clinton, to come clean. (In Bennett's script of these events, he'd be played in the movie by the smart, beefy Brian Dennehy, the Tony winner for *Death of A Salesman*.)

"If you're caught fucking around in the White House,' Bennett said, 'I'm not good enough to help you.' 'This is a prison,' Clinton responded. 'I purposely have no drapes on the windows.' As for women, 'I'm retired,' the president of the United States declared, repeating himself emphatically. 'I'm retired.'"

To Brill, this scene was likely cooked up from interviews with Bennett's friends, other reporters and various White House sources who knew the thrust of Bennett's conversations with the president, rather than from interviews with Bennett himself. Bennett denied to Brill that he ever had the conversation Woodward recounts—almost as strongly as his finger-wagging client, Bill Clinton, denied ever having "sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky." Yet there are so many scenes in the book between Clinton and Bennett reconstructed in painstaking, back-and-forth detail, complete with Bennett's inner thoughts ("Bennett had a sinking feeling," etc.), they could only have come from a) Bob Bennett b) Bennett's detailed notes of his conversations with Clinton or, the least likely, c) someone authorized by Bennett to speak to Woodward on his behalf. Any reporter who has tried to reconstruct a scene with a subject knows just how many time-consuming, nit-picking questions you have to ask to get it right, and only personal access to at least one of the main players (in this case, Bennett) makes that possible. Yet to Brill, Reed Irvine and other press watchdogs, Woodward is guilty of a reckless irresponsibility that could make his book a "fraud," as Brill puts it—despite an impressive track record of his books generally being verified as accurate years later by such subjects as George Stephanopoulos and Henry Kissinger. (You'll recall the controversial prayer-in-the-Oval-Office scene between Kissinger and Nixon in *The Final Days* that many ridiculed as a flight of fancy—but both Nixon's

and Kissinger's memoirs later basically confirmed it.)

As Woodward noted in an interview with *Salon*, "The question is the quality of the information. The information has turned out to be correct, going back to Watergate and going through all these stories."

The Bennett scenes will doubtless be confirmed later, too. In all likelihood, Bennett, Kendall, and other legal advisers (with the apparent exception of Bruce Lindsey), furious at being snookered by their lying client and embarrassed at foolishly allowing the Paula Jones lawsuit to explode into an impeachment crisis, have taken their revenge. As Alan Dershowitz wrote, "Robert Bennett may go down in history not only as the lawyer who walked his client into a perjury trap, but also as the lawyer who then blew the whistle on his client in violation of the rules of professional responsibility."

While Woodward has likely faithfully recorded what these and other sources told him, his critics are probably on stronger ground regarding his use of verbatim quotes reconstructed from long-ago meetings. As Brill and others have noted, former White House attorney Janet Sherburne and ex-press secretary Mike McCurry have insisted that Woodward attributed comments to them and the First Lady that they never said. Woodward has stood by his accounts, although he's conceded some minor errors in his reporting on yet another lawyer, Sydney Hoffman, who worked for the Lewinsky team. (He did make an honest if silly mistake: Hoffman was cited as believing that Lewinsky suffered from a "form of Clara Bow syndrome, named after the famous silent-film actress who couldn't say no." Yet as William Safire reported in August, Hoffman actually said that Lewinsky suffered from Clerambault's syndrome, a condition named after the French psychiatrist who identified it: A woman with a delusional belief that an older, powerful man is in love with her.)

Woodward's liberal use of quotes raises questions about craft and technique that may be of interest only to fellow journalists. Still, most of us feel queasy about using direct quotes if we're not confident that those words were said exactly as we write it. My guess is that Woodward is simply more willing to run with the gist of what he's told, dressed up as exact quotes remembered with curiously total recall by his sources and supplemented by their meeting notes. He is clearly pushing the envelope of recreated dialogue further than previous New Journalists did. Personally, I can't remember exactly what I said at lunch last week, let alone in meetings a year ago.

The more troubling issue raised by all these hard-

charging quotes that enliven Woodward's books, including *Shadow*, is their strikingly self-serving quality and Woodward's complicity in promoting his subjects' preening self-portraits. Typically, his subjects are also saddened and angered to discover dark truths about the President they defended; after awhile, they all begin to resemble Claude Rains as Captain Renault in *Casablanca*: "I'm shocked—*shocked*—to find that gambling is going on in here!"

We'll probably never know if Woodward was conned in any way by his sources. But we should at least be grateful that he saves us—and the American publishing industry—the time and expense of reading dozens of boring, self-serving memoirs that might otherwise be written by minor scandal figures like Bernie Nussbaum. Instead, we're given what amounts to a greatest-hits anthology of each key player's version of their most dramatic moments in the scandals, expertly stitched together by their patient, hard-working scribe.

As usual in Woodward's books, from *The Final Days* onward, such sources are often repaid with compliments and positive portrayals for their cooperation with him. They are usually shown as founts of Socratic wisdom, presciently warning their stubborn, short-sighted Presidents of the need to tell the whole truth as the scandal *du jour* mounts. Lloyd Cutler, hailed by his Boswell as "perhaps the most senior and experienced fixture of the Washington legal establishment," "shuddered as he watched the Clinton Presidency falter. It was precisely the kind of mess that was unnecessary—and, in his view avoidable ... Cutler felt that the guts of the Whitewater problem would be showing good faith cooperation." David Kendall, who may have seemed priggish and stiff on TV, is actually "a rare Washington lawyer with a genuine interest in culture, music, and art"—and he has a legacy of youthful civil rights activism, too.

The question raised by all these portraits of wise, honest, brilliant advisers in Woodward's books is: If everyone is so smart and public-spirited, who engineered all the mistakes, scandals and cover-ups?

Usually, in Woodward's world, it's just the President and a tiny band of evil cronies—who, coincidentally, don't seem to have cooperated with Woodward. In *Shadow*, counsel Bruce Lindsey is portrayed as one of the main culprits in resisting full disclosure. Not surprisingly, there are no detailed, flattering one-on-one scenes in the book of Bruce Lindsey beseeching his President to tell the truth.

Of course, you don't need to betray the President's trust to earn praise from Woodward; Starr's

deputies are also handsomely rewarded for apparently providing transcripts of secret grand jury sessions and behind-the-scenes retellings of their strategy sessions. One of his sources in Ken Starr's office even gets the equivalent of a free personals ad in *The Washingtonian* from Woodward: "[Brett Kavanaugh, 33] looked somewhat like a dark-haired version of the movie actor William Hurt, and he had a similar soft style." Ladies, he likes candlelight dinners and long walks on the beach, too.

(Not all cooperating sources are bathed in Woodward's emollients, of course. At one point near the end of *Shadow*, when Sam Dash quits as Starr's ethics adviser, he is described as "one of the legendary self-important egos of Washington." A question naturally arises: What did he do to offend Woodward?)

At times, *Shadow* and most of Woodward's books resemble a journalistic version of the product endorsement deals flaunted by NBA stars. Just as the warm-up jacket of Shaquille O'Neal might display the logos of Nike and Pepsi, each section of *Shadow* bears the clear imprint of the source or sources who have shared their deep thoughts with Woodward. My favorite example of this is the portrayal of the Judiciary Committee's Henry Hyde reeling from the disclosure by *Salon* of his adulterous affair three decades earlier. If you thought Hyde was an over-zealous ideologue, Woodward offers another view as he waxes poetic in his sympathetic portrait:

"Back in his office, Hyde was in near despair. He felt humiliated, degraded, sad for his children to know of his affair which was so dark and so wrong. He felt shame ... The story of the affair would be used against him the rest of his life ... What an awful price to pay. Maybe someone could learn from his sad experience. ... He didn't blame the White House, although he was sure they were taking pleasure in the disclosure. No, Hyde knew that his ex-mistress's husband had nurtured the grudge for decades and had released the story."

You can almost hear the sad violin music swelling in the background in this scene. Of course, Woodward doesn't say why, if Hyde knew the White House wasn't behind the story, he let his fellow Republicans go on the warpath over purported White House leaks of the Hyde story. As with other sections in Woodward's book, the only thing missing here is a sticker that says, "This touching passage has been brought to you by House Judiciary Chairman Henry Hyde."

Throughout *Shadow* and his other books, Woodward's ability to gain high-level, in-depth access to major players is always on display, mystifying and astounding his fellow journalists. It sometimes seems

to lesser mortals that he must do more than cozy up to his sources at restaurants with his fabled empathy, curiosity, and intensive preparation: Perhaps he also takes out a pocket watch and waves it slowly in front of, say, David Kendall's eyes, murmuring, "You're getting sleepy, very sleepy..." In fact, he is the Warren Beatty of political journalism: one of the great seducers of the modern age.

His methods were best described by one of those lured into cooperating, George Stephanopoulos, in *All Too Human*. He recounts meeting with Woodward at his home for his book on economic policy, *The Agenda*, wary, flattered, and curious all at once about visiting the great reporter. Over a late-night dinner, Woodward hits him with memos and documents describing Stephanopoulos' comments and role in earlier meetings. "Do you cooperate and elaborate in return (you hope) for learning more and earning a better portrayal—for your boss and yourself?" the White House aide asks himself. Beguiled by Woodward's mix of charm and intimidation, he cooperates and successfully urges others to do so as well, including Clinton himself. But he also later admits it was an act of self-aggrandizement: "Talking to him in an authoritative way demonstrates that you were in the room and in the know."

Even if speaking to Woodward has become a badge of honor in prestige-crazed Washington, making Woodward's Herculean labors a bit easier, it still doesn't take away from the scope of Woodward's accomplishments in this and other books. If the mere prospect of *reading* about ancient scandals and foul-ups in the Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush AND Clinton years is daunting—reliving everything from the Nixon pardon to Bert Lance to Iran-Contra—imagine how demanding it must have been for Woodward and his researcher to do all the reporting needed to construct a readable behind-the-scenes narrative of those years. Yes, his few analytic points are sketchy and banal (e.g., release the facts quickly about scandals), and his prose reads like a police report. But so what? In an ideal world, he'd submit his draft to Ward Just or James B. Stewart for a rewrite, but what he offers here is often fascinating reading anyway, particularly for hard-core political and history junkies, with fresh nuggets scattered everywhere. Of course, if you don't care, for example, that Defense Secretary James Schlesinger simply disobeyed direct military commands from Gerald Ford during the tail end of the Vietnam War, just skip ahead to the sex scandal in the second half of the book.

Still, when you add his reporting here to his insid-

er books on everything from Nixon's final days to Bill Casey's CIA to the Supreme Court, plus others, it's clear he's built something unique in American journalism. It's not only a monument to exhaustive and canny reporting, but he's also evolved, all by himself, into the Fifth Estate of government. From his days as the scrappy street reporter uncovering corruption at the Nixon White House he's turned into the Father Confessor of the Washington establishment, hearing the sins and foibles of Washington insiders. They're members of the first three estates of government, and after the press, the Fourth Estate, exposes government wrong-doings and mistakes, wrecking reputations along the way, they turn to Woodward for expiation and a chance to tell their side of the story.

Woodward grants them, if not absolution, an opportunity to live again in the pages of history, as the Washington power-players that many once were and hope to be again.

Thanks to their vanity and Woodward's hard work, we're offered an unrivaled inside tour of Washington power, although perhaps compromised by his sources' not-so-hidden agendas. I might prefer that he use his amazing reporting abilities more often to expose current evils rather than recreating past scandals and decision-making, but his investigative histories are still indispensable guides to our recent past—even if they're built on a foundation of betrayal. Let's just hope we don't have to learn in his next book quite so much detail about the next president's medical exams and private parts. ●

A Note From Charles Peters:

A few months ago, a reporter for Brill's Content, in the midst of interviewing me about another matter, mentioned how delighted she had been by a recent Monthly piece by Art Levine. Unfortunately, the reporter did not express that admiration in her magazine. This has been Art's fate. His fans have never gone public. The only exception is a 1983 article by Laurence Zuckerman in the Columbia Journalism Review, which, in a sidebar, completely reprinted Art's brilliant and very funny sendup of the Monthly (originally published in the magazine in 1979). Otherwise Art is our most unfamous alumnus. He deserves better. If you doubt me, read the parody of The Final Days that follows. Its take on Bob Woodward, as you will see, has been adopted by many writers, all of whom neglected to acknowledge that Art was first to point out Woodward's tendency—in contrast to All The President's Men—to rely on bigshot sources who are treated with kid gloves in return. The most obvious sources were Nixon's White House counsel J. Fred Buzhardt and his chief of staff Alexander Haig. They were less than totally innocent Nixonians, but from The Final Days, you would have thought they deserved canonization. So enjoy and remember to mention Art.

The Final Days of the Third Reich

As told to Woodward and Bernstein

By Art Levine

FOLLOWING THE CRITICAL AND COMMERCIAL success of our book *The Final Days*, our publishers have prevailed on us to bring out a new edition of our early work on Adolf Hitler's downfall, first published in 1947. Here, in embryo form, are the journalistic techniques that were later brought to fruition in *The Final Days*. Our ability to penetrate the innermost workings of the Third Reich should provide valuable insights for those inter-

ested in our methodology.

In the course of reconstructing events, we interviewed 586 Nazis and checked every detail with at least two sources. We divided this massive undertaking into several areas of inquiry, including: Adolf Hitler; the Reichschancellery staff; the SS; the Gestapo; the Propaganda Ministry; the Luftwaffe; the Nazi Party; Hitler's personal physicians; and the public record—statements by Nazi leaders, newspaper