

On Political Books

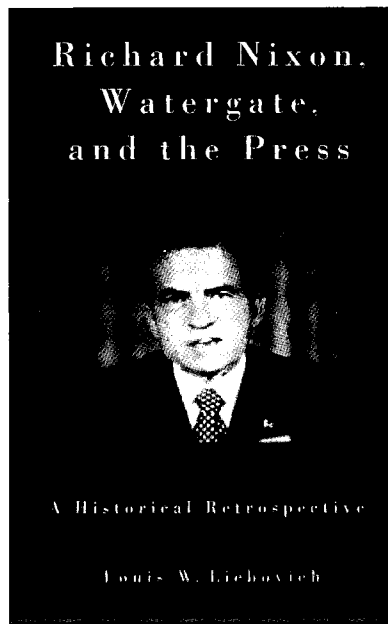
Nabobs Revisited

What Watergate reveals about today's Washington press corps.

By David Greenberg

“The definitive judgment on a president is almost always written during his life or in the first obituaries,” wrote the historian Fawn Brodie, referring to Richard Nixon, in 1981. “The patient work of historians and biographers may serve to rediscover and underline it, but it has always already been said by a contemporary, and usually with distinction.” For young historians writing about Nixon (myself included), this is a rather dispiriting assertion. But there’s more than a little truth in it.

Indeed, the journalistic accounts of Nixon, and especially of his downfall, written during and just after his presidency—J. Anthony Lukas’s *Nightmare*, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein’s *The Final Days*, Theodore H. White’s *Breach of Faith*—have proven hard to improve upon. As a result, Nixon scholars, not wanting to write what might be greeted dismissively as “another Watergate book,” have turned to under-explored areas of his presidency, such as his domestic policy making. One unfortunate consequence of this shift was to cede the Watergate field to conspiracy theorists, like the authors of the incoherent *Silent Coup* (1991). Even some of the better Nixon books of late steered clear of Watergate and thus may have unintentionally fostered the notion that the scandal need not underpin any discussion of the former president. Add to this trend the



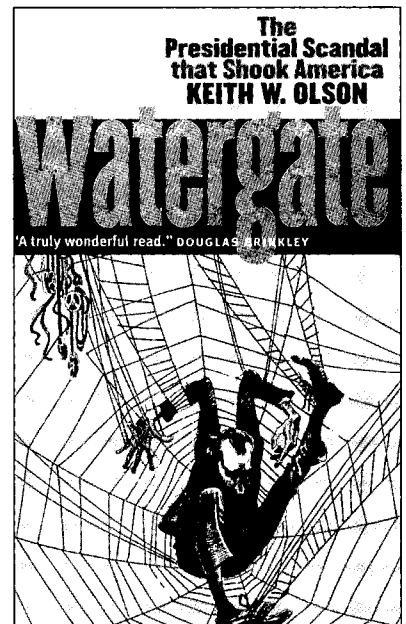
Richard Nixon, Watergate, and the Press: A Historical Retrospective

By Louis W. Liebovich

Praeger Publishing, \$49.95

steady debasing of the coinage of “scandal” in Washington, and you get an overall shrinking of the sense that Watergate was a uniquely important event.

The two books under review offer a sensible corrective to this historiographical drift. Both are by middle-aged scholars for whom Watergate was a vivid and central political experience. Both offer careful accounts of Watergate based largely on secondary sources. Unlike some of their contemporaries—such as Stephen Ambrose,



Watergate: The Presidential Scandal that Shook America

By Keith W. Olson

University of Kansas Press, \$35.00

who ended his Nixon trilogy avowing a newfound admiration for his old nemesis—neither man comes bearing a revisionist account. Rather, both wind up reaffirming what most of Nixon’s contemporaries, Republican and Democratic alike, concluded at the time of his resignation. Watergate was not, in the famous, fatuous, and inaccurate phrase of Nixon press secretary Ron Ziegler, simply “a third-rate burglary,” but, in Liebovich’s words, “a lesion on the surface that revealed a malignancy below.”

But these books do more than merely remind us of something—the gravity of Watergate—that we may have forgotten. They also shed a not-altogether-flattering light on the one institution whose reputation was enhanced by Watergate: the Washington press corps.

Press corpse

It is widely held that the news media performed heroically during Watergate, exposing secrets that otherwise would have stayed hidden. For liberals especially, the affair reinforced a tendency—rooted in a bedrock belief in free speech and open debate—to side with the press against politicians who complain about their press coverage. (Complaining about the press, the journalist Fred Barnes has written, is like whining about the weather: It affects everyone, and you can't do anything about it.)

In 1998, however, many who normally sympathized with the press watched horrified as the media, including respected journalists, got caught up in the mania surrounding Bill Clinton's impeachment—some parroting prosecutor Ken Starr's line, others predicting or calling for the president's resignation, yet others fanning the story with excessive treatment. The whole sordid interlude was, for reflexive defenders of the Fourth Estate, a rude awakening. It showed that the right's old complaints about the media's prosecutorial tendencies and herd instinct were, on some important occasions at least, justified.

Liebovich, for one, seems to agree with this analysis. He characterizes Watergate as virtually a Pyrrhic victory for the press, since “after the infatuation with Woodward and Bernstein passed, the public wondered about the role of the press generally in Washington. Many were ... convinced that Nixon was right about the excessive power of the media.” Certainly, the coverage of the Clinton impeachment (and other political dramas, like the 2000 election recount fight) led many people who once considered the media relatively neutral purveyors of the news to see the Washington press corps' signif-

icant faults.

This belated recognition, that the press acts not as a pawn of the left or the right, but according to its own (sometimes screwy) internal laws and logic, is a critical one. Liebovich writes that the “catalyst” for his study was a question he fielded in 1999 from a radio talk show host, who asked whether the causes of Nixon's resignation and Clinton's impeachment were the same. Olson says he was motivated by a wish to educate the next generation about Watergate's distinctive importance—“a Constitutional crisis second only to the Civil War”—a distinction, he notes, that both time's passage and the hype over the Lewinsky affair (not to mention the assorted semi-scandals under Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush, and Bush) have helped to blur.

Liebovich argues that Nixon's obsession with his press coverage typified the instrumentalist mentality that produced Watergate. He locates the beginning of the Watergate story not in the 1972 break-in of Democratic headquarters or even the 1971 formation of the White House Plumbers but in the illegal wiretaps Nixon had placed on inquiring reporters and loose-lipped aides in 1969. Watergate represented a war against the political opposition, but it was also an assault on the press.

Liebovich draws on an original survey of newspaper coverage he conducted of Watergate during 1972. Many historians have critiqued the mythology, enshrined in *All the President's Men*, of *The Washington Post's* lonely pursuit of the story in the summer and fall of 1972, noting that the FBI, the courts, the Senate Watergate Committee, and the special prosecutor actually brought Nixon's malfeasance to light. But if our culture has over-dramatized the exploits of Woodward and Bernstein, Liebovich's research shows that their reputation rests on a hard empirical foundation. Of the Watergate articles and editorials in 15 newspapers, the *Post* produced 39 percent, *The New York Times* 19 percent, and the other 13 papers 42 percent combined. Some newspapers, including the *Los Angeles Times*, relied as heavily on Woodward and Bernstein's articles as on those of

their own reporters. “A major scandal was largely ignored and an election was held under false pretenses,” Liebovich concludes. “Woodward and Bernstein kept the story alive—that is the significance of this time period, and that is what ensured their places in history.”

Although less explicitly focused on the press, Olson too gives journalists considerable credit. In his telling, journalists didn't topple Nixon so much as keep public attention fixed on damaging information at critical junctures. He suggests that the intense press coverage of a series of events in April 1973—from acting FBI director Pat Gray's destruction of files to Nixon's improper contacts with the judge in the Pentagon Papers trial—spurred Republican stalwarts, including party chairman Bob Dole, at last to question the administration's conduct. The editorial outburst following Nixon's speech some days later announcing the firing of his top aides likewise helped secure the appointment of a special prosecutor. The press may have just been relaying what government investigators knew, but the way in which it did so forced policymakers to respond. Its role, as Olson sees it, was a kind of midwifery.

Enter the swarm

Nonetheless, to credit “the press” for investigative tenacity in Watergate is too generous. In the first stage of the scandal, a mere handful of reporters joined Woodward and Bernstein in their pursuits. In the later stages, starting in April 1973, a multitude of others jumped on the bandwagon. Although this swarming coverage did help rivet public attention on the scandal, we often forget that it also had its unseemly side. In this respect, it foreshadowed the press' sometimes inglorious behavior during real and imagined scandals of later years.

It was always hard to sympathize with Nixon when he griped, as he did in his memoirs, that in mid-1973 “a convulsion had seized Washington ... Restraints that had governed professional and political conduct for decades were suddenly abandoned.” One can also brush off similar sentiments from his steadfast loyalists. But what about

the press corps regulars who agonized over their own colleagues' excesses? Esteemed veterans—and certified Nixon critics—including Joseph Kraft, Peter Lisagor, John Osborne, Harry Reasoner, and Daniel Schorr recoiled at how reporters who had missed the story in 1972 overcompensated in 1973. Osborne, *The New Republic's* revered correspondent, likened his peers to “dogs who have scented blood and are running the fox right down to his death.”

Journalists were right to sense that a major constitutional crisis was underway. “The documentation makes untenable the charge that liberal politicians and a liberal media drove Nixon from the White House,” Olson asserts. Yet it's also true that in the hothouse environment, critically minded reporting often gave way to a simple hunt for lies and misdeeds. Zeal encouraged errors. In May 1973, Walter Cronkite opened the CBS Evening News erroneously charging a Bethesda bank run by Pat Buchanan's brother with Watergate money-laundering. The AP incorrectly reported that John Ehrlichman was present at a key cover-up meeting. ABC's Sam Donaldson had to apologize for implicating former White House aide Harry Dent in Nixon's campaign sabotage efforts. Other news outlets overplayed trivial items, as *The New York Times* did by placing on the front page a three-column story—ultimately inconsequential—about the possibility that Nixon's campaign had received gambling money from the Bahamas.

Meanwhile, most of the exposés of the later period came from writers who worked at small papers or floated outside the White House press corps' tight nucleus. John Blackburn of the *Santa Ana Register* first reported that Nixon acquired the Western White House at San Clemente with shady financial help and renovated it with public funds. John White of the *Providence Journal-Bulletin* exposed Nixon's minuscule income-tax payments. Others who broke fresh ground, such as Jack Anderson, were once scorned as eccentrics but are now celebrated as mavericks. Most of the high-profile Washington



Richard Nixon's obsession with the antagonistic press aside, two new books on Watergate show that the media acts not as a pawn of the left or the right, but according to its own (sometimes screwy) internal laws and logic.

correspondents reverted to pack journalism during Watergate's climactic months—only this time around the pack was swimming in Watergate rather than ignoring it. Even during its heyday, then, the press corps showed itself capable of—if not structurally hard-wired for—the kind of collective prosecutorial mentality that frequently substitutes for tough-minded investigation.

Tape delay

All of which raises the question: Were Watergate and Whitewater mirror-image scandals, with conservatives blasting and liberals cheering the media during Watergate and the roles reversed under Clinton? Although time and events have added new perspective to the media's Watergate role, this is a facile conclusion. These books help establish why.

The facts of the matter scarcely

need reviewing. Clinton was impeached for giving misleading and possibly false answers under oath to questions about his sex life that were later deemed immaterial to the trial. Nixon resigned for a smorgasbord of incidents in which he illegally abused his presidential power to help himself politically or financially, or to punish his political enemies. Whatever the behavior of the press, the relative gravity of those actions determined each man's fate.

Both of these books rightly conclude that Nixon's actions were *sui generis*. That judgment is significant because historians as a rule don't like attributing so much power to an individual; it usually means neglecting long-term developments that have more explanatory power. Yet with Nixon there seems to be no getting around his singularly crucial role.

It seems that Olson would like to conclude otherwise. In his epilogue, he contends that Watergate blossomed from a Cold War national-security state in which every president from Harry Truman to Lyndon Johnson “used exaggerated rhetoric, crisis analysis, and oversimplification” to justify both the commission of illegal acts and the concealment of them from the public. But Olson seems to recognize that this analysis, which in the 1970s was fashionable with the New Left, is at odds with the story he has just told. And so even as he critiques the post-World War II power structure, he can't avoid the verdict that Nixon's crimes were “unique.”

Liebovich, for his part, is tempted to toss Nixon in not with his predecessors but with his successors. Every president from Ford to Clinton aroused distrust in the press for his efforts at manipulation. The resulting negative and even sneering coverage kept public cynicism high. But Liebovich also cannot allow his recognition of a long-term dynamic in presidential-press relations to obscure what he calls Nixon's oversight of “one of the most corrupt and immoral administrations in U.S. history.” Nixon's “abnormal preoccupation with the influence of the press,” he determines, “was largely responsible for

the most despicable of White House covert activities.”

Like Olson, Liebovich concludes that Nixon’s own actions were the key to his demise. Well into 1974, after all, Nixon had a fighting chance to survive. Though public opinion was coalescing against him, without conclusive proof of his role in the cover-up, he wouldn’t have been impeached. But his own tapes caught him discussing hush money and clemency for the defendants in the break-in trial and recorded him plotting to have the C.I.A. squelch the investigation under bogus national-security pretenses. The revelation of this baldly criminal behavior alienated not only moderate congressmen, but also conservative loyalists, without whose support Nixon was doomed. It was not George McGovern but men like Barry Goldwater, the stalwart Republican senator, and John Rhodes, the House Minority Leader, who forced Nixon to step down. “When President Nixon resigned,” Olson notes, “... Americans stood with uncommon unanimity on a crucial political issue that had once divided them.”

Besides the culture of scandal, another development of the last generation has been the rise of press criticism as a staple of journalism. The pioneers of this criticism of the late 1960s and early 1970s understood that the press corps had grown to be what the journalist Douglass Cater called “the fourth branch of government” and that it had to be scrutinized like any other branch. While the acknowledgment of the power of the press is welcome, if not overdue, what’s most surprising about its behavior in both the Clinton scandals and Watergate is its modest influence on the ultimate outcome. In both cases, a few journalists did heroic—even historic—work. Others performed their job creditably. Many more were suggestible and sheep-like. The difference between 1974 and 1998 was not the changes in the press corps, but the fact that Nixon had committed serious abuses of power. Nixon—not the press—brought himself down.

David Greenberg is the author of *Nixon’s Shadow: The History of an Image*.

On**Political**Books

Count Me Out

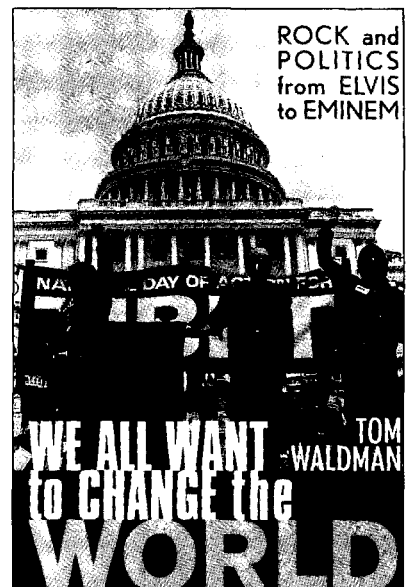
Why rock and politics don’t mix.

By David Segal

We *All Want to Change the World* ought to be a shorter book. The history of rock and politics could be summarized in an hour or two, because pop stars—or their handlers—are typically smart enough to stick to their strengths, namely selling music and piercing their extremities. Many performers are simply apolitical or indifferent, and the few who dare to approach the podium tend to tiptoe. Even the Beatles tune that provides this book’s title is a study in equivocation. “You can count me out,” John Lennon tells destruction-minded agitators on “Revolution 1,” a cut from the *White Album*. He then promptly changes his mind. “In,” he mutters a moment later.

But with *We All Want*, author Tom Waldman wades into this pool as though it were a great lake, and for 300 pages he dawdles like a man with a month to kill. His goal is strikingly timid. The book, he announces in the prologue, “holds that the shape, direction and the history of rock and roll, soul and rap has been affected by the Vietnam War, women’s lib/feminism, gay liberation, black nationalism and self-reliance, the environmental movement, affirmative action, President Reagan and President Clinton.”

Well, no doubt he’s right. It would be bizarre if an art form as popular and as porous as rock were totally impervious to current events, wouldn’t it? The



We All Want to Change the World: Rock and Politics From Elvis to Eminem

By Tom Waldman

Taylor Publishing, \$24.95

question isn’t whether politics has had an impact on rock, and vice versa, but how large that impact has been. And the answer is: not very.

This couldn’t be news to Waldman, a former congressional assistant and author of a book on Chicano music. He quotes rockers throughout *We All Want* who seem to be urging him to give back his advance and write about something else. “I’ve always said, and I don’t think I’m being revisionary here,” says Michael Stipe of R.E.M., “I don’t think music and politics mix.” (And R.E.M. is