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Book Reviews

Watergate's Legacy and the Press: The Investigative Impulse

By Jon Marshall

Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011, 313 pp.

Reviewed by James Aucoin
University of South Alabama

Much of the academic research about the press's coverage of the sordid Watergate scandal of the 1970s concludes that journalism had little influence in the fall of President Nixon. In the bigger picture, historian Stanley Kutler, journalism historian Michael Schudson, and others have argued, at most the press kept pressure on government officials to do something. Jon Marshall credibly disagrees.

Marshall argues that the full extent of the Nixon administration's criminal behavior would never have been known without the *Washington Post's* steadfast investigation. The Justice Department kept the White House informed of its investigation to such an extent that Nixon bragged he had the attorney general under control. Moreover, the FBI narrowly focused its investigations of Watergate and the burglary of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office to avoid involving Nixon and his advisors. Consequently, Mark Felt, second in command at the FBI and Bob Woodward's secret source referred to as "Deep Throat," reported in his memoir that the White House cover-up would never have come to light without the press investigation. Indeed, press reports provided criti-

cal insights into the scandal for judicial and congressional figures that were central to the prosecution of President Nixon and his aides.

To his credit, Marshall has written a contextualized history of the Watergate scandal, examining the press's investigative evolution before Watergate was exposed and the scandal's effect on the press and the executive branch of the federal government. Covering relatively well-trodden ground, Marshall provides new material on the history of the press's investigative spirit. He reasonably concludes that by the end of the Colonial era, aggressiveness towards power had taken hold in the press. This "investigative impulse" grew stronger with the coming of the penny papers and expanded still in the crusading sensational newspapers of the latter nineteenth century, climaxing in the muckraking era in American magazines in the early twentieth century. Marshall agrees that the impulse lessened after 1920, primarily kept alive by left-wing opinion journals, self-published newsletters, and a few gallant editors at local newspapers. He then traces the rebirth of investigative journalism in the 1950s and 1960s, which has been previously

documented by several scholars. [Full disclosure: Marshall cites my own work on the evolution of investigative journalism in several places, and I favorably reviewed Marshall's book proposal for Northwestern University Press.]

Marshall sees Watergate as a pivotal moment in the history of investigative journalism that careened the press into more investigations but ultimately caused a backlash on the press from politicians and the public. He notes that the backlash wreaked even more damage on the investigative press because it came in the 1980s and 1990s when newspapers and TV news operations began to lose audience to cable and the Internet and ad revenues started their devastating plunge. At the same time, Nixon's predecessors in the White House reacted to his fall by becoming more secretive and more adept at managing the news. This combination of diminished will in the press, persistent criticism from the public, and consolidation of power in the executive branch culminated in the George W. Bush administration, Marshall points out. Indeed, Marshall asserts, the press's weak response to allegations of vote rigging in Florida during the 2000 election further weakened the press and strengthened the victorious Bush camp's ability to control the news media's coverage of his administration. Marshall reasonably argues that this helps to explain why the American press largely failed to challenge Bush's deceptive push for war against Iraq.

Nevertheless, but much too late, the Bush administration's big lie about weapons of mass destruction was exposed, and the press regained



its investigative impulse, Marshall argues. However, the impulse in the 21st century is more likely seen in venues other than the traditional newsroom settings, including work done by non-journalistic entities such as Amnesty International and new web-based investigative startups like Spot.us and ProPublica that thrive through grant-funding and collaborations with traditional news organizations.

Understandably Marshall isn't declaring a new age of investigative journalism or even predicting for certain survival of the investigative press through foundations, universities, and web-based operations. It is way too early to say that the experiments in nonprofit funding and collaboration will be able to fully

replace the loss of investigative zeal in most traditional newsrooms. But the experiments are producing significant investigative work and therefore Marshall is correct that these projects offer hope to those of us who recognize the importance of the press's investigative impulse to our democratic society.

In conclusion, Marshall provides

an excellent history of investigative journalism and contributes to the scholarly literature a new appreciation for the press's performance during the Watergate scandal. His book is deeply researched and elegantly written. Indeed, it would be an excellent complement to texts in journalism history and advanced news reporting courses.