

## BOB WOODWARD: HANDS OFF, MIND ON

*By Bob Woodward*  
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A story from the reporting trenches about Katharine Graham: Seven months after I started working on the Watergate stories with Carl Bernstein, she invited the then-managing editor Howard Simons and me to lunch in her fabled dining room. It was Jan. 15, 1973. Carl was out of town. I wrote notes immediately afterward, noting that eggs Benedict was the main course. She vividly conveyed her unease about the investigation, asking about our progress and the identities of sources. In her memoirs, she called this the “eggs-Benedict lunch” and noted that while I had offered to identify the source Deep Throat, she said she didn’t want to carry that burden around.

For me, the significant moment at the lunch occurred when she asked if the truth about Watergate and Richard Nixon’s people would ever come out. Because the Nixon White House was so well-versed in closing off the information flow, I replied that Carl and I weren’t sure anything like the full story would ever emerge.

“Never?” she asked. “Don’t tell me never.”

I was 29 and had worked for The Post for 16 months. Her words were like a shot of Adrenalin. I took them to mean, correctly, that the ultimate boss wanted us to get to the bottom of the story. Not only were the stakes very high if we were wrong, but “never” was unacceptable. The full resources of her newspaper, company and editors were available, she indicated. After we had finished our food, she said she was reassured. But her wonderful face, which was never good at concealing some of her inner turmoil, said: Do better.

At that moment she achieved the perfect managerial pitch. I was awed, well-fed, supported and put on notice that she was engaged and knew the details of the stories down to the bookkeeping details of the secret Watergate cash slush fund. She wasn’t going to meddle, try to edit or second-guess, but she did, after all, want a better performance. Her skill was to raise the bar, gently but relentlessly. She did not tell

us that The Post company’s TV station licenses were being challenged and that Watergate reporting could have killed the newspaper.

It is true that Katharine Graham kept her hands off the news reporting and editing. But as important, she kept her mind on it — ferociously. As Watergate unfolded for the next 20 months, she kept us informed about what Henry Kissinger, Nixon’s national security adviser, was saying. If a White House official called her, she took notes and sent them on immediately. She helped us analyze the motives and knowledge of various players. Many times she warned about taking ourselves too seriously and the dangers of the limelight. In other words, accompanying her bravery was a deep sense of the peril of being wrong or unfair or shallow or even being miscast as partisans.

Her role at The Post was not a sideline position. At times, she was a secret source passing on a tip from her celebrated off-the-record dinners. I always protected her but joked with her and others that we observed the Graham rule — off-the-record meant it would not be used unless it was really good. But these were not notes or calls from a distant tipster. In many ways, she was always on duty. If she played tennis, it was with the secretary of state, a White House lawyer or former CIA director. She read books, loved music, went to operas, wrapped her mind around the hefty issues of science and medicine. In other words, she was a whole person who insisted on whole-person understanding of the issues we covered.

She once called me to her house and asked my private conclusions about a section of the paper, promising to keep the confidence off-the-record, so to speak. I proceeded to unload a withering critique that coincided with hers. It was too good not to use, and soon she called to say she was sorry, but she just had to tell my boss, then Executive Editor Ben Bradlee. As always, Bradlee was gracious, though he reminded me of the chain of command. But Katharine Graham understood that the pursuit of news and information can be arduous, time-consuming and, at times, includes violating the chain of command.

When her 1997 memoir came in at 625 pages, she was half-embarrassed but confided that it took that long to get it all down, keenly mindful of the self-therapy involved in telling the full story, with its pain and triumph. Self-understanding was the elusive goal, not only for history or readers but for herself, and she came as close to it as anyone. Last month at her 84th birthday party she noted that she lived alone, so she was married to her friends. That was true, but she was wedded to much more — to a spirit of unfettered inquiry; to a willingness to listen, weigh arguments and welcome alternative points of view; to an openness to accepting more and more information.

Three years ago, I did an interview with Mrs. Graham for a book I was doing on the effect of Watergate on the five presidents after Nixon. She agreed to talk but insisted that she not be quoted by name. Then she played down her knowledge and understanding of Presidents Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush and Clinton. “But you do have your observations,” I said.

“That’s why I don’t want to be quoted,” she replied sharply. For two hours she then proceeded with a brilliant summary and series of often-hilarious, dead-on anecdotes about the leaders, yielding a 33-page single-spaced transcript.

It’s really good.

*The writer is an assistant managing editor of The Post.*