

'More dangerous than McCarthy'

Journalist Carl Bernstein pulls no punches in assessing Trump's rise



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BY ADAM SENNOTT
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In 1992, legendary journalist Carl Bernstein blasted the media for their obsession with celebrity, manufactured controversy, gossip and sensationalism in "The Idiot Culture," his article for The New Republic.

The front pages of newspapers across the country had been more focused on Donald and Ivana Trump's divorce than they were on Nelson Mandela's return to Soweto or the re-unification of Germany, Bernstein said. "Good" journalists, such as Diane Sawyer, were asking Trump's lover, Marla Maples, if he was "really the best sex you ever had?"

"To me that was as low a point in our journalistic evolution in the last part of the 20th century as could be imagined," Bernstein now bemoans. "And I think I recognized that it was only going to get worse. In retrospect, the piece looks pretty prophetic."

More than two decades on, Donald Trump is once again on the front pages of newspapers around the world in the weeks since being elected president — in a campaign that featured candidates Bernstein described as "two incredible celebrities."

Trump's election is an "incredibly dangerous moment" for America, said Bernstein, whose reporting for The Washington Post was instrumental in uncovering the Watergate scandal that forced President Richard Nixon's resignation.

Bernstein said Hillary Clinton had a "difficult relationship with the truth," which ultimately sank her campaign. But Trump, he said, is "more dangerous than McCarthy," because never before "did a demagogue reach the presidency."

Trump is not only a product of the celebrity culture Bernstein wrote about in the early 1990s; he's also a master of it. The veteran journalist described him as a "con man whose identification as a business person has been about his use, manipulation and draw of media."

"He is both a self-creation and a media creation," he said. "But he's the one who's been a genius at using the media, and (that's) partly because he's shameless."

Shortly after the Republican primaries, Bernstein said Trump had "made monkeys out of all of us."

Clinton has never been comfortable with

the press, even though Bernstein calls her "the most famous person in the world."

In Bernstein's biography of Clinton, "A Woman in Charge," he wrote that Clinton has "a fierce desire for privacy and secrecy," which seems to "cast a larger and larger shadow over who she really is."

What she serves up for public consumption, Bernstein wrote, "is usually elaborately prepared and relatively soulless. That is the true shame."

It was that fierce desire for privacy that led Clinton to use a private email server while she was Secretary of State, which Bernstein called "indefensible" and said "did endanger national security."

The server, he said, was also "emblematic of those questions about trust and openness that have dogged her for years. She couldn't get past that."

It also didn't help that Bill Clinton got on an airplane with the attorney general while Hillary Clinton was under investigation by the Justice Department. It "was unthinkable what he did," Bernstein said.

Misguided media-blaming

Despite Trump's media mastery, Bernstein said it's not fair to blame the media for the outcome of the election.

"I don't think that Donald Trump was elected because the media did a bad job," he said. "I don't buy it for a minute."

He said there was some good journalism produced during the election season, about Trump and his businesses.

"What's really interesting is that a lot of the great reporting in the campaign was done by a lot of the old traditional, mainstream news organizations," he said, particularly by The Washington Post, The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal.

That doesn't mean the mainstream media were perfect, Bernstein said.

"Television was very late to do investigative biographies or even documentaries on any of the candidates in the primaries," he said.

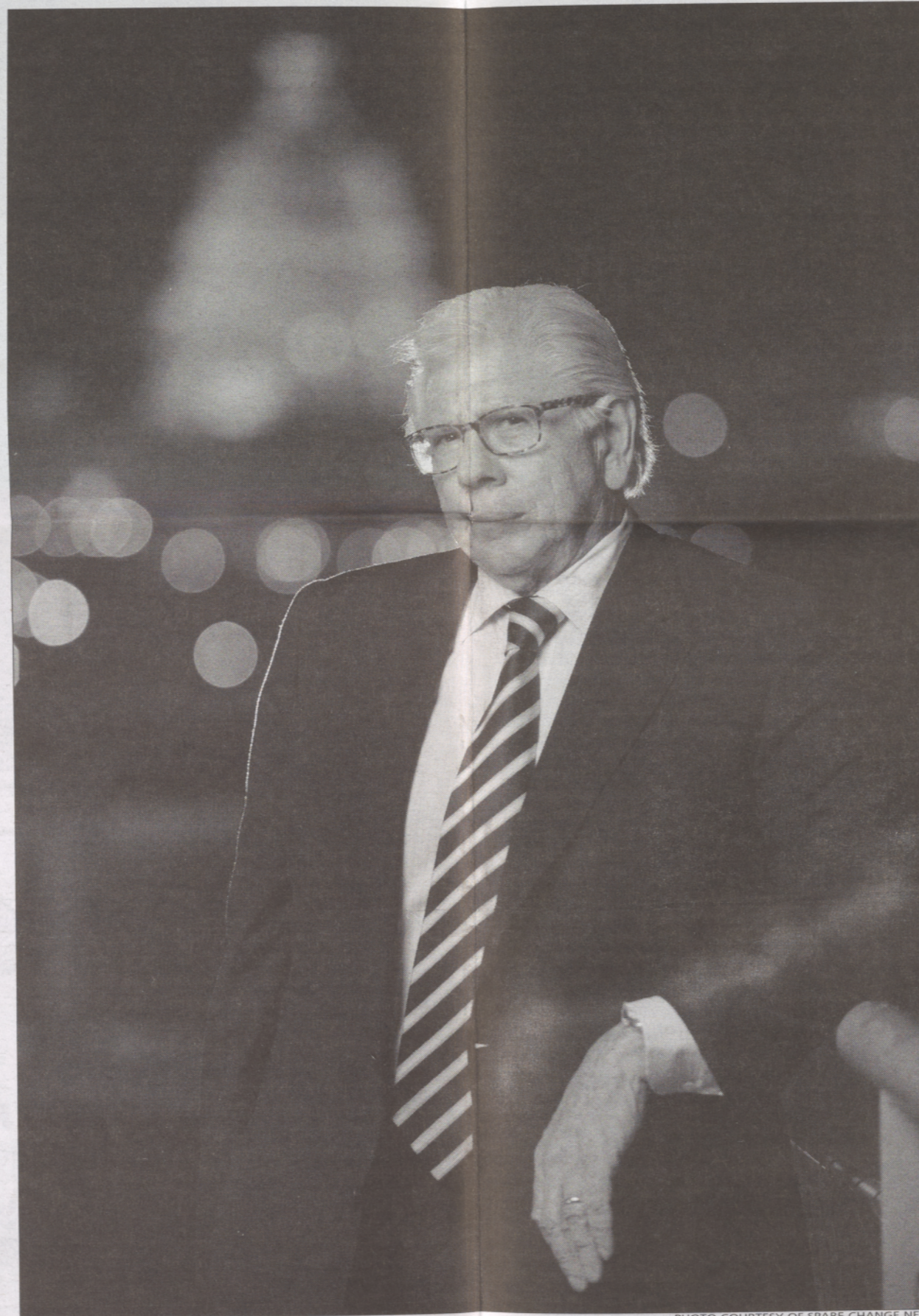
"We did great in terms of having on-camera debates with analysts and talking heads, myself included, but not enough early on in the formative stages of the campaign."

Still, the TV networks were able to pick up and amplify the reach of stories that were initially reported by national newspapers.

"Television did pretty well in reporting those aspects that were developed primarily from the Times, the Post and the Journal," Bernstein said, "and building on those accounts and giving them prominence in their broadcasts."

What he believes skewed the real issues

Though critical of the media's sensationalism, Bernstein says the mainstream press isn't to blame for the election of Trump. Instead, 'go to the voters.'



Veteran journalist Carl Bernstein is a critic of President-elect Donald Trump's demagoguery and disregard for the truth. Bernstein is best known for breaking the Watergate scandal, along with colleague Bob Woodward, as a young Washington Post reporter.

were social media, white-nationalist media and websites such as The Drudge Report, which defined Hillary Clinton "in grotesque terms that have almost nothing to do with the reality of who she was."

Those types of sources "had a lot to do with how this campaign evolved," Bernstein said.

"The power of the old configuration of media with a few television networks and a half-dozen newspaper organizations, now online, hardly defines the coverage and the media equation," he said.

'Versions of the truth'

Those looking to place blame on the media for Trump's election should "go to the voters," Bernstein said.

"I think there's much too much focus on how the media performed as opposed to how citizens, over the last 25 or 30 years, and especially in this campaign, have taken and processed information," he said. "It's very easy to blame the media and let the citizens off the hook."

"Increasingly, people in this period have become more interested in processing information and looking for information to uphold their point of view and reinforce what they already believe and buttress their already held prejudices and political beliefs (and) religious beliefs. So that we don't have a citizenry interested in the best obtainable version of the truth."

Bernstein also cautioned against making overgeneralizations about the outcome of the election.

"All of these questions are very complex, and you can't attribute them to one element or another," he said.

"When you look at the picture and all of its complexity, and if you look for explanations based on the best obtainable versions of the truth, then you begin to understand how all of these things play together in a kind of matrix that give you a much clearer picture of not only what happened in this election but who we are as a country and what our problems are and what our weaknesses are and what our strengths are."

"So I think this election in many regards is perhaps a pretty good indication of where we are as a country in all kinds of complex ways."

Despite running a campaign "appealing to the worst instincts of Americans in terms of racism, xenophobia, nativism and sexism," Bernstein said Trump, like Bernie Sanders, was able to connect with millions of white working- and middle-class voters who have become increasingly alienated and ignored by our political system.

Many other voters saw legitimacy in addressing the concerns of these

Americans, as well as people of color and other marginalized groups. Clinton was "very, very slow to recognize" the needs of these voters, Bernstein said.

"I think that her campaign, in this regard, was too much based on a strategy of mobilizing Latinos, African-Americans, women, and not remembering and stressing enough that the Democratic Party, historically, has been the party of the working class."

Bernstein said: "She misread, and those around her misread, the electorate, and also, she was not an inspiring candidate. Had she won, it really would have been because President Obama ... had dragged her across the finish line with constituencies that needed to turn out, but also as a great character witness for her."

"But it wasn't sufficient in the end."

Dangerous promises

During the campaign, Bernstein called Trump a pathological liar, a con man and an American neofascist, not in the likes of Hitler or Mussolini but that of 20th-century Argentinian President Juan Perón. Now that Trump has been elected, Bernstein said he's not sure which of his campaign promises the president-elect will follow through on.

"His campaign promises are a mix of the horrific and (the) ugly and undemocratic," he said. "But also there are some campaign promises, such as his call for huge infrastructure spending, that address questions long overdue that the Republicans particularly have been keeping from happening."

Trump also showed "an ignorance about our history in this country, what real existing conditions are, such as his characterization of black America with any sort of recognition whatsoever of the huge black middle class in this country," Bernstein said — that "black communities were exclusively impoverished, crime infested, not just enclaves, but blanketed in that way... which is not the case."

"His election is an incredibly dangerous moment because of what he promised to do," he warns.

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