

KUNHARDT **FILM** / FOUNDATION

ROBERT REDFORD

THE NEWSPAPERMAN: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF BEN BRADLEE

KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

ROBERT REDFORD

Actor/ Director

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Interviewed by: John Maggio

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START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

The Newspaperman

Kunhardt Film Foundation

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Robert Redford

Actor/Director

The press, the entertainment industry, and politics

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ROBERT REDFORD:

Because of the relationship between the press, the entertainment industry, and politics, I think if you put those three things together, the tension that exists between the three was interesting to me dramatically.

Watergate and the story behind the story

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ROBERT REDFORD:

I had. Yeah. Not with the interest of making a film about it. I was just interested as a citizen, you know, because at that time, the voice of Woodward and Bernstein was not to be heard of at all. It was all about Nixon. Nixon controlled the universe at that time, politically. And when it was clear that his paranoia was going to have him, once he had all the power, he would try to use that power to dispose of anybody that would go against him, particularly if it involved the truth. That got me because of my personal feelings about Nixon at that time, which was a man not to be trusted. Nobody else was in that place, because he had the power. So, when these two guys started writing these articles, they were the only ones to do so. I thought, wait, somebody's doing something here. And that got me focused on them. Then once that thing blew up and blew up and their articles increased to the point where they began to get attention against all other people, and the whole thing blew open in, I think, September.

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ROBERT REDFORD:

And then they were castigated as not having told the exact truth. I saw a profile about the two guys. And I had not – at that time, they were just the byline under the article. Now I was seeing a profile of the two guys. That's what got me, because they were so opposite in so many ways. One guy was a Democrat; the other guy was a Republican. One guy was a Jew, the other guy was a WASP. One guy came from a privileged background. The other didn't. They didn't care for each other. They didn't respect each other's writing, but they had to work together. I said now that's interesting, which of course led to why were they working together? It wasn't about the politics of the time so much as their personal relationship about how they had to work together

considering all their differences.

Ben Bradlee's job was a balancing act

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ROBERT REDFORD:

They had to be approved by somebody. At that time, I think Ben Bradlee was basically adhering to Katharine Graham, who was the main person behind *The Post*. She was under threat, so he was out to protect her. These two guys were doing stories that were going to expose a lot of things, so Bradlee was in this really tricky spot of having to protect Katharine Graham and *The Post*, at the same time encourage these two guys to keep doing what they were doing. The whole thing could have exploded. So he had this balancing act to negotiate in the middle of it. That's what led me to him. Who was this guy that had this difficult job? And that's what led to Ben Bradlee. It took me to Ben himself. In the beginning, he was very paranoid about Hollywood. Rightly so and distrustful and so forth, so you had to gain his trust. So I spent a lot of time. Alan and I checked into the Madison hotel across the street and I spent a lot of time going to *The Post* and spending time with the editors who worked with and for Bradlee, but with Bradlee himself. It took a long time for me to convince him that we were going to tell an accurate story. We were going to try to tell the truth. He was not trusting in the beginning.

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ROBERT REDFORD:

Because he was such a shrewd guy, he was very tough minded, he was very eloquent and sort of –there was something I really liked about him. Maybe it was our Irish heritage that we share, but a bit of a fight in us, you know, but

going against the odds and so forth. Anyway, I liked the guy, but he wasn't giving me anything, you know. And over time, it was about building his trust so that I could get to the real story. That's why Bradlee became such a significant character and why I felt that the only guy to play him was Jason Robards.

Getting Jason Robards to play Ben Bradlee

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ROBERT REDFORD:

Well, I had a relationship with Jason that went way back many years earlier in 1960. During 'The Iceman Cometh', which had been done as 'Circle in the Square' first in 1956 and then 1960. Then we were gonna do a — Sidney Lumet was going to do a TV version. Jason was going to play the main character. That was going to elevate Jason's profile, which he deserved. I had a small part about a weak-minded character who betrays his mother and then in the end has to commit suicide. While we're doing it, I didn't have much to do. I had hardly any lines at all, but he was very kind to me. Nobody else really was. He just paid me some attention. I never forgot that courtesy. So years later, when Jason's career had gone in a downward direction because of his drinking and so forth and he had been injured in a crash, and they wouldn't hire him, I said, "I want him for Bradlee," and the studio said no. I said, "Well, then I won't do it. You got to have Jason." So he got in, and you saw happened—that was payback for me. That was a chance for me to pay back a courtesy I was given as a young actor.

The similarities between Jason Robards and Ben Bradlee

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ROBERT REDFORD:

Jason was very much—he embodied Eugene O'Neill. I had been a huge fan of Eugene O'Neill, and without going too much into this, it turned out that my grandfather, who was a musician, in New London, Connecticut, had been a friend of his. I didn't know that. That came up later in life. So there was that connection that I wasn't aware was actually a family connection. I just responded to O'Neill's work. There was something in his work. There was a dark side to it that really hit me. And so, when you put all this together, I felt that Jason had that in him. He had that dark side that amplified O'Neill. And so, I guess the three came together: my interest in O'Neill, my fondness for Jason, Jason's having played O'Neill. All three came together.

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ROBERT REDFORD:

Jason had a wonderful, strong voice. He had a gravelly, tough voice. He could play that beautifully. Bradlee was legitimately tough. He was legitimately tough, and he had a wonderful sense of suspicion about him, not really trusting what was coming his way and playing with it, you know? Being very tough minded, he swore a lot. He was very profane, which took him out of the category of most people like that, you know, and put him in a whole separate category all of his own. He was boisterous, very tough minded, and very smart. He was very, very smart. But there was something about him that kind of enjoyed the fight, and that's what I responded to. I felt that Jason could embody that as a performer.

The story is what counts

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ROBERT REDFORD:

The other thing about Bradlee, which I responded to, was something that since that time it's become even more important and more prominent, what's the story? Bradlee was always saying, which we had Robards repeat was, "Hey, what's the story? Don't give me this and give me that. This little accent, that little accent. Tell me what the goddamn story is, because that's what counts." I think without maybe knowing it at the time, I respond to that, the value of story so that later on in my life and my career I placed huge importance on the value of story so that for example, if I'm going to do something now it'll be broken into three parts. What's the story, who the characters that embody the story, and more importantly, where's the emotion? If you can get all three pulled together, then you've got something to work with. But for me, without story there's nothing. I think that had a lot to do with Bradlee. Then Jason improvised that in the film. He just keeps saying, "Where's the goddamn story?"

Politics and the press

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ROBERT REDFORD:

It's not about politics. I don't have a lot of regard for politics per se, but the relationship between politics and journalism I do have, because journalism is what keeps politics straight. Is politics telling the truth or not? And very often, politics doesn't tell the truth. It just tells a story that's being told by one side or the other, but it's journalism that gets to the bottom line and says, "Wait a minute. We're hearing this, we're hearing that, but what's the truth?" I

think we're into that now.

Pyrrhic victories and politics

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ROBERT REDFORD:

The idea was I had huge respect for documentaries that had big impact on my life as a filmmaker starting with Emile de Antonio back in 1960 with *Point of Order* (1964) and then Pennebaker Leacock and as a young actor, before I became a director, I was very impacted by the quality of you are there. You felt like you were right in the room with these people. I really like that. When it came time for me to be able to direct, I wanted to employ a documentary sensibility. So, the first films I made, the first films I was capable of making were very intent on the subject of winning. Because I felt that winning was paramount in American culture, that no matter who you were, what you had ... Winning was more important than anything. I had been told as a young athlete in California that it doesn't matter who wins or loses. It's how you play the game.

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ROBERT REDFORD:

And I found that to be a lie. When I was in sports, I realized winning was everything, so later on when I got into entertainment and film, I wanted to tell that story that despite what people are saying, winning is everything. So, I had this concept of taking three divisions of society: sport, politics, and education I guess it was, and say what if you applied the subject of winning to all those three categories? So the first was sport. Wanted to show a guy could literally be a shit, a very unappealing character, but he'd be totally celebrated,

even— accepted even celebrated if he could win. So, I wanted to play that character. That was *Downhill Racer* (1969). He was very unpopular and rightly unpopular. Because he could win, he was tolerated. But at the very end, you ask yourself, what have you really won? When they lift you up, you say, "What have you really won when you see that somebody right behind you is going to be the next winner and you're going to be forgotten?"

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ROBERT REDFORD:

So how important was this? I wanted that to be a statement about the pyrrhic victory of winning. That then led to politics. Sport first, and then politics. I would play a character that valued winning at any cost. Then, in the end, you would say, "What have you actually won?" So that my character would ask the same question at the end. It would end the movie with a question. What has been won here? You get out right then and there.

Keeping the president out of *All the President's Men*

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ROBERT REDFORD:

I said this should not be about Nixon. History will take care of Nixon. If we make it about that, it will be polarized. This has to be what happened underneath all that. It's really not about Nixon. Nixon's a historic headline maybe, but it's about these reporters that did something nobody else was doing, or very few were doing that uncovered who he really was and what he was really doing. So it was really about them, not him. Even though I had feelings about Nixon going back to my childhood, I said if it's about him, it won't be the story that I want to tell. Because the public's going to know

about him. History will take care of him.

Winning was important to President Nixon

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ROBERT REDFORD:

When we were preparing it, I realized that winning was very important to him at any cost, you know. He was obviously a deeply insecure man who needed to... He needed to overcome that insecurity by being something he really wasn't. So he built everything all around him — even a henchman like Murray Chotiner, who was later replaced by Halderman — You know, these henchmen around him that would elevate him and claim him to be something he wasn't. Finally, it all caught up with him, and he was like a paper tiger, you know? Humpty Dumpty.

A cynicism about journalism

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ROBERT REDFORD:

I think there was a cynicism after Watergate, but there was also a cynicism before. I think there's probably going back to the turn of the last century, there's cynicism about journalism. I was interested, and where Dean came into my life was what you could title this a documentary, which I would like to make next, and you would title it 'There Was A Time'. There was a time when two sides worked together. Speaking of John Dean, when I was going through archival footage to do a reassessment of Watergate, which I said no, it's done. That's been past. They said, Discovery Channel said, "Would you please look hard at it?" I was looking at archival footage, and I saw this moment where

the panel that was investigating John Dean about Nixon.

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ROBERT REDFORD:

And he was smooth as silk. He was smooth as silk and being very persuasive. The panel was questioning him. They were all united to try to get to the truth, but they were made up of Democrats and Republicans. There was Sam Dass, there was Sam Irwin, all these guys, and they were all united. I said, "Oh, so there was a time when two sides did work together to get to the truth." That time at the moment is gone.

When journalism was about the truth

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ROBERT REDFORD:

Because it was about the truth. It was about the structure of our political system, which had to involve the truth. The truth was under threat. I think Bernstein knew that, you know, from his personal background. And so, I think that Carl was very much on track to say, "Hey, can I play a role in getting to the truth when the truth is trying to be obfuscated by the most powerful man in the country right now?" So I think Carl will always have a voice in the mix, you know. I mean I think you can see, I don't have to say anything about that. All you have to do is look around, and you see how the truth is under threat. With so many people claiming the truth and so few people really entitled to make that claim, and the public is paying attention to a lot of other things than it was in those days because there are more choices out there than there were. You know, there are more channels. There were only three or four channels then for the truth to be funneled through. Now, there's so many.

Where do you go? What do you do? People are streaming. There's a whole lot of other stuff that makes it harder for people to find out where is the truth really? The only hope you can have when you sense, wait a minute, there's something going on here that is just not the truth. It's hyperbole. It's propaganda. It's not the truth. Where do you go? The only place you can go is you have faith that eventually the truth will out. The people who are claiming the truth who are not truthful will self-destruct. That's the only hope you got.

Promoting *The Candidate*

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ROBERT REDFORD:

Where this whole thing started was I was on a train in Florida promoting the film, *The Candidate* (1972). It was the year of the 18-year-old vote, and I thought that promoting that film would draw attention to that. I was on the back of the train, and I was on the back of the train going to these places, and I would get on the back of the train and I would have statistics about Muskie having come through, Scoop Jackson having come through, Lindsay having some through. I said so far they drew 200 people, 500 people. Looks to me like there are thousands here today. I just want to thank you all for coming and just want to tell you something. I have absolutely nothing to say and the train would pull out. That was the point that the film was trying to make. I was totally unqualified, and yet I was popular. So as a character in the film, so we were trying to make that point. I got so depressed after a couple of stops. I thought geez, I don't want to do this anymore. I would go back and forth. When I'd go back into the train, there was entertainment press and political press that were there recording this.

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ROBERT REDFORD:

They were not interested in me so much. They were gossiping. They were gossiping about the break in at Larry O'Brien's headquarters. And I said— because this was about two weeks later from the actual event. I said, "Hey, by the way what happened to that?" They looked at each other, you know that looks. "What happened? Where's that ..." They said, "It's not going anywhere." I said, "What do you mean it's not going anywhere?" They said, "You don't understand. It's not going to go anywhere. That's going to go away so fast. It's never going to come out." I said, "Why?" They said, "You really don't understand how it works." I said, "What do you mean?"

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ROBERT REDFORD:

He said, "Well, first of all, Nixon is going to win on a landslide. Nobody wants to be on the wrong side of this guy. He has a switchblade mentality. Nobody wants to be on the wrong side. He's going to go against the press. He's going to go against the major news organizations. Nobody wants to be on the wrong side. Secondly, the public is not going to be paying any attention. They're going to be paying attention as to whether Hank Aaron breaks Babe Ruth's record. It's going to be August. No one's going to be paying ..." I got so upset by that. I got off the ... I did not finish the thing. And so I went back home, and I was really sad by the fact that it would never come out. And then suddenly these little byline things started to appear in the paper. It was Woodward and Bernstein. I said woah, somebody's doing something, you know. And so I was prime to follow them, which I think a lot of people probably weren't. I was already prime to say, "Is anybody going to do

something?" They were the ones. That kept getting bigger and bigger and bigger. I followed it like a hawk.

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ROBERT REDFORD:

Then the whole thing blew up in September. It appeared through some grand jury testimony they had done something wrong and it was all wrong. There was an article that was written about who these two guys were. That's what I focused on. It was really not so much whether they were right or wrong, about their relationship. These two guys and they're such opposites that had to work together. That led me to want to explore them, which led me to try to meet with them and talk to them about who they were.

The legacy of Watergate

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ROBERT REDFORD:

I guess it remains to be seen whether it's just a moment in time or whether it's going to have some weight... some carried forward weight. I just don't know. Probably had a dark side to it as well, you know. It was encouraging at the time. I was all excited. I thought you mean I could play a role in getting more people to going to school to want to be journalists? Gee, that's pretty exciting.

The spotlight on Washington

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ROBERT REDFORD:

It was very important. I thought it was a spotlight that hadn't been shown yet.

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Maybe *All the King's Men* (1949) maybe, you know, many years before. I felt that for something so important as journalism, that there'd never really been a film that exposed its value and its negative side until this. That's why I felt this was a chance to do a film about journalism, not about the president of the United States.

Respect for Ben and his quest for the truth

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ROBERT REDFORD:

When you boil it all down, the most important thing was his quest for the truth. I think that's the bottom line here is that, you know, the quest for the truth. And so therefore, journalism is important because it's truth to power, you know. I think that will always be important, and I think right now the press is the only vehicle to get truth to power. The question is can you trust what they're telling you?

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