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The Woodward scandal should not blow over

Bob Woodward probably hoped that the long holiday weekend would break the momentum of an uproar that suddenly confronted him midway through November. But three days after Thanksgiving, on NBC's "Meet the Press," a question about the famed Washington Post reporter provoked anything but the customary adulation.

"I think none of us can really understand Bob's silence for two years about his own role in the case," longtime Post journalist David Broder told viewers. "He's explained it by saying he did not want to become involved and did not want to face a subpoena, but he left his editor, our editor, blind-sided for two years and he went out and talked disparagingly about the significance of the investigation without disclosing his role in it. Those are hard things to reconcile."

An icon of the media establishment, Broder is accustomed to making excuses for deceptive machinations by the White House and other centers of power in Washington. His televised rebuke of Woodward on Nov. 27 does not augur well for current efforts to salvage Woodward's reputation as a trustworthy journalist.

The Woodward saga is a story of a reporter who, as half of the Post duo that broke open Watergate, challenged powerful insiders – and then, as years went by, became one of them. He used confidential sources to expose wrongdoing at the top levels of the U.S. government – and then, gradually, became cozy with high-placed sources who effectively used him.

Now, Woodward is scrambling to explain why, for more than two years, he didn't disclose that a government official told him the wife of Bush war-policy critic Joe Wilson was undercover CIA employee Valerie Plame. Even after the Plame leaks turned into a big scandal rocking the Bush administration, Woodward failed to tell any Post editor about his own involvement – though he may have been the first journalist to receive one of those leaks. And, in media appearances, he disparaged the investigation by Special Counsel Patrick Fitzgerald without so much as hinting at his own stake in disparaging it.

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Interviewed several months ago on NPR's "Fresh Air" program, Woodward portrayed the investigation as little more than a tempest in a teapot. "The issues don't really involve national security or people's lives or jeopardy," he commented, adding that "I think in the end, we will find there's not really corruption here."

Woodward also told the national radio audience: "The woman who was the CIA undercover operative was working in CIA headquarters. There was no national security threat, there was no jeopardy to her life, there was no nothing. When I think all of the facts come out in this case, it's going to be laughable because the consequences are not that great."

But there was never anything laughable about Fitzgerald's investigation into the Plame scandal. And Woodward had learned to take it a lot more seriously by the time he appeared as the only guest on CNN's hour-long "Larry King Live" the night of Nov. 21.

After days of bad publicity, Woodward was in a spinning mood. He seemed eager to run out the clock as he filled time with digressions and minor details. When in a corner, he often brought up Watergate, as though his days of indisputable glory could draw light away from his recent indefensible behavior.

Larry King is rarely a vigorous interviewer; his customary mode of questioning is much closer to Oprah than "60 Minutes." But King, who has featured Woodward on his show many times over the years, seemed agitated during the latest interview. And that's understandable. After all, Woodward had previously gone on the show and dismissed the importance of the Plamegate scandal while withholding relevant firsthand information.

Woodward has written best-selling books heavily reliant on interviews granted by top administration officials. During the Nov. 21 interview, the unusually engaged King zeroed in on a dynamic that often pollutes the work of big-name journalists in Washington: They get and retain access to the powerful because they don't go out of bounds.

Noting that Woodward was able to avail himself of lengthy interviews with President Bush for a recent book, King said: "He's given you three hours. He'll help you with the next book. Doesn't that give him an edge with you?" And, King pointed out, the benefits of such arrangements run in both directions, for author and president alike: "He's not going to come out looking terrible because you want him for your next book and you'd like to have that in."

Bob Woodward wasn't grilled by Larry King. But the questions were vigorous enough to make America's most renowned reporter seem evasive and self-absorbed.

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During the long interview, Woodward gave various explanations for his careful silence that misled Post editors and the public. He did not want to get dragged into the Plame-leak investigation with a subpoena, and anyway he was preoccupied with gathering information that would be revealed later in a book.

Overall, Bob Woodward's priorities seemed to center on Bob Woodward. Yet near the end of the interview, he offered this platitude with a straight face and without a hint of self-reproach: "I think the biggest mistake you can make in this sort of situation as a reporter is to worry about yourself."

Norman Solomon is the author of "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death." For information and excerpts from the book, go to: www.WarMadeEasy.com