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April 30, 2001

Media Talk: Gore Questions Report in Woodward Book

By FELICITY BARRINGER

The setting was a class at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. Sandra Mims Rowe, the editor of The Oregonian in Portland and a driving force to enhance newspapers' credibility, was worrying out loud about the profession's reliance on anonymous sources. So was the professor, Al Gore.

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The conversation turned to Bob Woodward, said five people present, three of whom preferred to remain anonymous. The reporting on the Watergate scandal, which brought fame to Mr. Woodward and Carl Bernstein, his onetime colleague at The Washington Post, needed anonymous sourcing, she said, but the same could not be said of Mr. Woodward's more recent work.

Mr. Gore took up the theme, making reference to the first pages of Mr. Woodward's book about the early months of the 1996 presidential campaign, "The Choice" (Simon & Schustercoei, 1996). He said the book's opening description of Mr. Gore's private weekly lunches with President Clinton was fictional, those present said. He added, according to one student's notes, that Mr. Woodward "had asked me to give him some color," about the meetings, but, "I declined — it did not feel right." e13

To those present, it sounded like the former vice president was denying he had talked to Mr. Woodward about those lunches with Bill Clinton. A student, Benjamin Bolger, said: "The vice president commented that he did not speak with Mr. Woodward. And it is his understanding that the president did not speak to Mr. Woodward about such an encounter. He found it of concern that a prominent journalist would reconstruct a meal and a conversation."

Mr. Woodward, however, said last week: "It is not fictional. He talked."

Twice, the journalist said, he met with Mr. Gore for interviews in April 1996. Of Mr. Gore's remarks to the class, Mr. Woodward said: "It is very sad. But it teaches you to never put away your Al Gore file."

Asked about the apparent discrepancy in these accounts, Kiki McLean, Mr. Gore's press secretary, had no comment.

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